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## ***Rishtas*: adding emotion to strategy in understanding British Pakistani transnational marriages**

Alison Shaw and Katharine Charsley

### **Abstract**

The popularity of transnational marriages that in most cases involve first cousins or other kin distinguishes Pakistanis from other British South Asian groups. This article is concerned with explaining the popularity of such marriages. We seek to complement accounts that stress kinship obligations and socio-economic strategy, by showing that transnational marriages are also motivated by the emotional ties of kinship. Central to this analysis is a focus on the Urdu/Panjabi concept of *rishta*, which conveys ideas about a ‘good’ match and about emotional connections between people. Our attention to emotional discourse between siblings, between parents and children and between prospective spouses in the context of marriage arrangements augments the understanding of what is at stake for those involved in transnational marriages. Our analysis also complements accounts that emphasize parental exegesis by offering a multigenerational perspective.

## **Introduction**

The migration of spouses to the United Kingdom is a characteristically South Asian phenomenon, but Pakistan sends more marriage migrants than India and Bangladesh combined (Home Office 2001). In the year 2000, over ten thousand Pakistani nationals obtained entry clearance to join partners who are British citizens (Home Office 2001). The majority of these marriages are consanguineous (taking place between kin ‘of the same blood’), usually involving first or second cousins. Indeed, two small-scale studies and one national survey suggest that the proportion of consanguineous and particularly first cousin marriages among the children and grandchildren of pioneer-generation British Pakistanis has increased in comparison with their parents’ generation and with figures from Pakistan (Shaw 2001, 2000a; Darr and Modell 1988; Modood et al 1997:319). A striking feature of these consanguineous marriages is that they are transnational, involving a spouse usually from Pakistan or elsewhere in the Pakistani diaspora, such as the Middle East or the United States.

This article extends the analysis of motivations for arranged consanguineous marriages in this transnational context. We seek to complement accounts that stress kinship obligations and socio-economic strategy, by showing that transnational marriages are also motivated by the emotional ties of kinship. Transnational marriage is a subject of recurrent concern to the British Pakistanis with whom we have worked. Marriage itself entails risks, particularly for a daughter who, in Pakistan, traditionally moves to her in-law’s household, where she is vulnerable to mistreatment by her husband or in-laws. Transnational marriage introduces a new range of social and emotional risks for those involved. It separates young people from their natal families (Charsley 2005), and it exposes British Pakistani women to the dangers of becoming ‘immigration widows’ whose husbands have been refused entry visas (Menski 2002) or of being abandoned by men whose commitment to the marriage extended no further than gaining entry to Britain and acquiring British citizenship (Werbner 2002).<sup>1</sup> Marriages arranged within the family are viewed as a means of protecting one’s children against these potential harms.

Against a background of such concerns, we suggest here that an exploration of emotional discourse as it relates to marriage arrangements illuminates what is at stake for people arranging transnational marriages involving kin such as first cousins, and thus provides a fuller explanation for the continuing popularity of such marriages. We seek not to establish the site of emotion, or whether emotions are innate or culturally created, universal or cross-culturally variable (Lutz and White 1986, Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990, Beatty 2005), but to show, also, how paying attention to emotional discourse can ‘reanimate[s] the sometimes robotic image of humans which social science has purveyed’ (Maschio 1998). As recent work on marriage in India suggests, rigid, unemotional models of marriage may have been an elite ‘invented tradition’, taken as social fact by European colonists and scholars (Parry 2001).

More specifically, in our focus on emotion in transnational marriage arrangements, we highlight the positive sentiment of affection, in relationships between siblings, between parents and children, and also between prospective spouses. Our analysis offers an important corrective to recent research that highlights the abuse of the arranged marriage system in transnational contexts and UK media and policy-interest in the issue of forced marriage.<sup>2</sup> A dominant image of transnational arranged first cousin marriage is that unsuitable matches are ‘forced’ upon unwilling young people in response to socio-economic, cultural and psychological pressure by parents from working class uneducated rural backgrounds, typically from Mirpur district in Azad Kashmir (eg. Mohammad 2005). Our fieldwork presents many counter-examples: the working class, rural-origin British Mirpuri father re-negotiating a planned *rishta* (match) in order to safeguard his daughter’s happiness; the city-origin, educated, middle-class British Panjabi parents arranging a *rishta* with a first cousin raised and educated in the United States. The British Pakistani population is heterogeneous in socio-economic status in Britain and origins in Pakistan. Transnational marriages involving consanguineous kin occur across all the main subgroups without corresponding in any simple way with social class in the UK or with parental regional or urban/rural origins in Pakistan (Shaw 2001).

Our case material reflects this diversity, being drawn from fieldwork conducted in different UK localities: in Bristol among mainly but not exclusively urban-origin Panjabis (Charsley 2003) and in Oxford, Leeds and High Wycombe among mainly but not exclusively rural origin Panjabis and Mirpuris (Shaw 2001a and 2003). In combining material from different fieldwork locations, we offer an analysis that challenges stereotypes and is not restricted in its explanatory power by social class or regional origins but reflects the diversity to be found within Britain's Pakistani population.

### ***Rishtas*: strategy and connection**

The starting point of our argument is our informants' concept of *rishta*, which means 'match', 'proposal' or 'connection': *both* notions of strategic advantage *and* the emotional elements of marrying where connections already exist are part and parcel of the concept of the *rishta* (Charsley 2003). In Pakistan, marriage within the extended family or *birādarī* (other than with a relative prohibited as a spouse by Islamic marriage rules) is culturally preferred but not prescribed (see e.g. Donnan 1985, 1988; Fischer 1991). Existing scholarship on Pakistani marriage choices explores the interaction between social and cultural conventions governing a good match (*rishta*), environmental factors and individual motivations in determining actual marriage choices (Donnan 1985, 1988; Shaw 2000a, 2001; Fischer and Lyon 2000; see also Bourdieu 1977). Donnan's influential analysis demonstrates how marriage arrangers make use of the social and cultural specifications for a 'good' match in order to negotiate the most advantageous arrangements, particularly where there is more than one spouse to choose from (Donnan 1985, 1988). Thus, some of the reasons people give for preferring marriage within the family, such as that it ensures similarity of socio-economic status between contracting households and protects the interests of daughters otherwise vulnerable to mistreatment by in-laws, are seen as justifications for the strategic interests of marriage arrangers (Donnan 1985, 1988; Fischer and Lyon 2000:307; Shaw 2000a:158). It may, however, be misleading to draw too sharp an analytical distinction between cultural expectations on the one hand and individual choice and action on the other, because conformity to

social and cultural expectation can be an important element of individual motivation in marriage choice, while pursuing one's best interests is also part of the Pakistani cultural expectation of marriage.

Understanding the connotations of *rishta* helps clarify what is sought in arranging a marriage and reintroduces elements of sentimental connection between family members largely absent in strategic accounts of Pakistani marriage choices. In the context of marriage arrangement, *rishta* means 'proposal' or 'match', but also has the wider sense of 'connection', as in being 'well-connected'. Within the normative ideals of marriage arrangers, a good *rishta* is one between people who are socially and personally well-matched; the usual criteria of a good match include education, personality and physical characteristics. That marriage should be between social equals is a central principle of marriage choice and viewed almost as a religious duty: according to one *hadith*, the Prophet recommended marriage between equals (Ahmad 1978:14). Marriage arrangers emphasize that *rishtas* are usually sought within the family because it is so much easier to find a good match this way, since both parties to any proposal have prior knowledge about the suitability of a potential spouse and their immediate kin (Donnan 1985:183). A woman's physical beauty may also be less harshly judged in *rishtas* sought within the family than in arrangements involving outsiders. Those who seek *rishtas* outside the family do so for reasons that include a lack of suitably-aged spouses among their close kin. Yet people often assume that if a *rishta* is sought outside the family, there is something wrong with that child, such as a disability, undesirable personality trait, or a tainted past, even though in these circumstances too spouses from within the family may be considered more suitable.

Relatives are *rishte-dār*, literally 'owners of connection', the *-dār* suffix indicating possession. A *rishta* in this sense can extend to relationships other than those of marriage and to non-kin, such as neighbours. This connotation of *rishta* is also helpful for our understanding of what people seek in a marriage proposal or match. As has often been repeated, South Asian arranged marriages are not simply relationships between individuals, but between families. A marriage involving non-kin or those only more distantly connected creates new relationships and new networks of *rishte-dār*, drawing more people than the couple themselves into kinship

relationships, which may then be reinforced by further marriages in the same or subsequent generations (Shaw 2000a:144-7).

In marriages between cousins or other kin, as in the majority of Pakistani marriages, where the ability to trace a kinship connection is usually part of what is considered a good *rishta* (as ‘match’), the significance of viewing a *rishta* as ‘connection’ lies in its ability to strengthen existing ties of kinship. A *rishta* may transform a distant or untraceable connection within the wider *birādarī* into a relationship as in-laws, or it may intensify already close kinship. A person’s ‘closest’ relatives are often those to whom they are related several times as the result of consanguinity and marriage. If two sisters-in-law are double first cousins, because their mothers are sisters and their fathers and brothers, they will probably meet frequently, at significant family events such as marriages, death anniversaries and Eid gatherings and through casual visiting, because they will have many close relatives in common; this is likely to produce closeness and mutual support. Choosing a *rishta* is therefore an opportunity to produce or reproduce closeness between particular kin, enabling sections of a family to meet more frequently, as in-laws. As this suggests, kin relationships are not permanent but require efforts to be sustained. Panjabi proverbs reflect the ephemerality of kinship without continued intermarriage: ‘When the fence is old, it is your duty to put new wood into it’ (Werbner 1990:96) and ‘A new brick strengthens the wall’ (Shaw 2000a:155). These connotations of *rishta* as connection and closeness are thrown into relief where family members are divided through transnational migration; in arranging transnational marriages, people seek to diminish social and emotional as well as physical distance. Below, we consider the significance of transnational *rishtas* with reference to emotional discourse in the context of links between siblings, between parents and children and between prospective spouses.

### ***Rishtas*: as connections between siblings**

Accounts of Pakistani transnational arranged marriage give a central place to parents’ desires to maintain contact with the land and family they left behind when they themselves migrated (e.g. Ballard 1987). Part of this impetus is socio-economic

and can be traced to the desire to improve the status of the family in Pakistan that originally motivated Pakistani post-war labour migration to Britain, combined with the obligation upon parents to consider their siblings' expectations regarding their children's marriages (Shaw 2001). As Roger Ballard wrote in the late 1980s, British Pakistani parents of Mirpuri origins

...usually find themselves under intense pressure to accept offers of marriage on behalf of their siblings' children back in Pakistan. And they also know that if they refuse, they are likely to be charged with having become so anglicized that they have forgotten their most fundamental duties towards their kin. These pressures are extremely hard to resist. So as more and more migrants' children reach marriageable age, the frequency of marriage with partners back in Pakistan is rising rapidly (Ballard 1987:27).

A popular explanation for cousin marriages is that they keep assets such as land, property, education and earning potential within the family, where they can benefit kin rather than outsiders. For transnationally divided families, one of these assets may be the British citizenship of unmarried men or women, because marriage to a British citizen contains the possibility of migration to Britain. Most British Pakistani families are thus in a strong position to seek a 'good' match from Pakistan for their children, while among kin in Pakistan, marriage plans for sons in particular can become entwined with the possibility of labour migration abroad.

The fact that contemporary transnational marriage migration involves men and women in equal numbers (Home Office 2001), however, suggests that more subtle processes are at work than a simple re-creation of the earlier phrase of male-dominated labour migration within the constraints of current immigration restrictions. Married women are not expected to support parents or siblings in Pakistan, but may view their migration as offering opportunities to extend some of the economic benefits of migration to natal kin in Pakistan, particularly through the marriages of their children. Shazia, living in Bristol, wanted her daughter to marry her only sister's son in Pakistan so that she could give her sister a dowry. This match would also enable the nephew's migration to Britain, thus demonstrating

migrant women's ability to promote the migration of other family members (see also Mooney, this volume).

Moreover, to emphasize economic strategy or the sharing of economic benefits alone would be to overlook the emotional significance of transnational marriage in reinvigorating kinship connections weakened through living continents apart. Nabila, born in Pakistan and married to a maternal cousin, her mother's sister's son, in Bristol four years earlier, commented that her *rishta* took place:

Because my grandmother, she wants to marry [me] with my cousin because my mother and my aunt, they just both sisters [i.e. no other siblings]... If I married here then they will stay together (*ikhattē rehngē*) (to KC, partial translation from Urdu).

As noted above, kinship must be worked at to be kept alive, for without the reciprocities of visiting and participating in life course rituals, kin ties can fall into disuse. The older generation of grandparents in Pakistan, such as Nabila's grandmother, and pioneer-generation migrants in the UK may be particularly aware that marriage, more than any other life-course event, is central to reinvigorating bonds between people and places. For most pioneer-generation British Pakistanis, who left siblings in Pakistan on migration to Britain, marrying their children to nieces or nephews in Pakistan offers opportunities to strengthen relationships weakened through migration. Ghalib, who came to Britain in the 1970s, arranged his son's transnational marriage because:

I wanted to keep a link with Pakistan. If I have found all my three kids *rishtas* here [England], my link to Pakistan would have been broken... I don't want to break that link to my homeland, to my family, to my country, so that is a main reason which I actually went to Pakistan [to look for a bride for my son] (to KC).

While Ghalib and his wife considered this one transnational marriage sufficient to maintain connections with kin in Pakistan, for other couples, a husband and wife's desires and obligations to consider kin in Pakistan may result in several

transnational marriages. Hanif, who came to Britain in the 1960s, arranged his elder son's marriage to his sister's daughter Shamim, wishing to strengthen his connection with his sister, who had moved on marriage to Kuwait. However, his wife Hamida's wishes prevailed when they arranged their younger son and daughter's marriages to Hamida's youngest, favourite brother's daughter and son in Pakistan. These marriage choices have important long-term consequences: a few years after his marriage, the couple's younger son, British raised and educated, chose to return with his young family to his wife's parents' neighbourhood in Pakistan, where he now runs a successful business; this then enabled Hamida to return to Pakistan, to the same neighbourhood, following Hanif's death.

Particular *rishtas* are thus the outcome of negotiations that may reflect the sometimes conflicting, competing and variably-weighted interests of all those with a stake in a proposal, including the nature of parents' relationships with their own siblings. The resulting pattern of Pakistani first cousin marriages does not show any strongly marked preference for a marriage with the father's brother's son or daughter (the patrilateral parallel cousin), as reported for parts of the Middle East and the North West Frontier. Rather, father's siblings' children *and* mothers' siblings' children (patrilateral *and* matrilateral cousins) are considered (although preferential *birādarī* in-marriage makes all cousins patrilineal kin in this broader sense). Ideas about compatibility and similarity between same-sex kin may help explain why marriages are arranged between the children of same-sex kin within the pool of available cousins (Fischer and Lyon 2000:305). Brothers' shared socio-economic interests may explain the slightly higher number of marriages between father's brother's children (Shaw 2001), and women's desires to share the benefits of migration with kin in Pakistan may be also important in explaining the pattern of marriage choice (Charsley 2003). Here, we note siblings' desire to strengthen affective ties weakened by migration as an additional motivation for transnational marriage.

While marriage migration may strengthen relationships between kin in disparate locations, it simultaneously reproduces distance between the new migrant and the kin they leave behind, a distance which they may seek to reduce through the marriages of their children. Hanif's eldest son's marriage had strengthened Hanif's

relationship with his sister, but for his daughter-in-law Shamim, marriage migration had separated her from her only sister, her brothers and her parents. Now, with her own children's marriages, Shamim wants to reduce this distance:

I have seen my sister very little since my marriage. I came to England in 1980, she went to Kuwait. I said to her on the phone the other day, wouldn't it be nice if we make a *rishta* between your daughter and my son... My sister has no son; if we make a rishta there, it will be for our son. For one daughter, we are thinking of [a second cousin on Shamim's mother's side] in Pakistan. For our younger daughter, we are thinking of the son of my brother who lives in Kuwait. They have asked us, and we are talking to him about it. It is making us brothers and sisters closer (to AS).

These processes of marriage arrangements have for Shamim invigorated connections with siblings and cousins in Pakistan and elsewhere; her husband supports these arrangements as he does not wish his more problematic relationship with an only brother to become complicated by *rishtas*.

The transnational marriages of children and grandchildren of pioneer migrants are thus creating new links in already complex networks of people dispersed across continents, reconnecting them with kin and places in Pakistan, including through semi-permanent return migration.

### ***Rishtas*: emotional connections between parents and children**

Transnational marriage arrangements involving kin in Pakistan are also motivated by powerful emotional bonds between parents and children. These include the parental desire to secure their children's long-term happiness and reduce the social and emotional risks of marriage, which are perceived to be greater in marriages arranged outside the family ('*bāhar-se*') than within. Marriages between cousins, as the closest kin permitted as spouses and as the children of loved and trusted siblings, strengthen consanguinity with affinity (ties through marriage), and, at least from the perspective of parents, thus offer multiple routes to trust, security and support.

British families usually rely on relatives to suggest *rishtas*, use photographs, wedding videos, and telephone and internet conversations with third parties to gather information about prospective matches, and may present one or several proposals to their children. A son or daughter's views are also crucial in determining a proposal's acceptability. When she was in her late teens, Zarina, now a mother of teenage children, had initially been offered a *rishta* with her father's sister's son, who, like her, had been born and raised in Britain, but felt strongly that she did not want to marry this cousin:

It was not my cousin himself, the man is good. It was something about my auntie. When I was about 12, I went there for a weekend... For some reason, my auntie went out and left me with the baby. The baby screamed and I did not know what to do. The whole situation felt wrong. So I phoned my Dad and asked him to bring me home. He didn't ask why, he just fetched me back. When my Dad suggested a *rishta* there some years later, I knew I did not want that cousin. My Dad respected my feelings. In the end, my sister married him. It is okay, because they live separately from his parents now, but I was not wrong about my feelings about my auntie (to AS).

While recognising their right to veto a *rishta* they are unhappy with, many young adults are happy to let parents and other relatives do the work of finding a *rishta*, respecting their parents experience and judgment in making a good choice. Rashida, 22 years old, spoke of how she envisages this:

[My parents] will wait until I tell them I want to get married... I have decided that I will go with my parents' decision, with who they choose, and I will tell them when I am ready. I don't want much, but I want someone kind, who will look after me. My parents will be a good judge of that. I will be happy with someone from Pakistan. All I will say is that if I discover there is something in what I hear about him that I don't like, then they must listen to me. They will listen, they won't force me (to AS, 2002).

Parents' views may be a source of advice and obligation: some young people feel they should follow their parents' wishes, in repayment for the love and care their parents have given them. Saif, a 27 year old Bristol man, made what he described as an 'emotional decision' to accept the match his mother had favoured while dying.

While Saif's consideration of his mother's feelings could be interpreted as emotional or psychological pressure, for Saif:

the overriding feeling was this is what my Mum wanted. She sacrificed so much for me, I just thought, and my whole family actually, I just thought this is the only way I can repay them.... Maybe it's a bit of a thing about our culture – to sacrifice things for our family and to repay them for any debts that you think you owe (to KC).

For others, the closeness they feel to a particular parent's sibling, an aunt or uncle, as already 'family', may swing their choice in the direction of one cousin rather than another. Shareen's choices had included kin and non-kin and British and Pakistani candidates, but she chose her mother's brother's son from Pakistan. Like several other British women, she had been taken to meet potential husbands during short visits to Pakistan, reversing the custom of receiving visits from prospective grooms (see also Thandi, this volume). She had visited families on both parents' sides of the family, but had felt particularly comfortable in her mother's brother's house:

I already knew his parents and the sisters and everything. It was just straight in there, have a chat. It was a lot more easier... I liked his dad, my uncle, my *māmuñ*. I really liked him from the beginning. When we were little he used to talk to me, and he used to always send my things, and I used to always really like him. I thought, 'It'll be really nice if I have a nice father-in-law'. Because....already I know him.....So I said to my mum, I want to go to their house again. And this time it was OK because it was me, [him], my sister, and his sister...It was a bit shy to say your words! But we got there in the end...I could see from what I could see that I'd be quite happy with him...His family's nice, his house is nice and everything, his sisters are nice. [I thought] I'll feel more comfortable there than going to somebody that I am not even sure with, and family that I've never heard about (to KC).

Zobeen, too, had particularly liked her prospective father-in-law, her mother's brother, who, she said, made her feel as if she was his own daughter:

After the marriage when I went to his [her husband's] house, every morning he [her father' in-law] made tea for me when we were staying in his house, he treated me more like a daughter not at all like a daughter-in-law. He was just like he was my own Dad. I couldn't believe it (to AS).

### **Transnational cousinhood: kinship, identity and cultural continuity**

For young British Pakistanis, the prior connection of kinship can be as important a motivation for accepting a transnational *rishta* as it is for the parents making these proposals, constituting a link between couple who may have only met a couple of times previously. Besides prior kinship, however, young British Pakistanis have other positive reasons for accepting transnational *rishtas*. Rashida's sentiment, noted above, that, 'I will be happy with someone from Pakistan' was echoed in other British Pakistani women's reflections on their marriage choices. Farhat, 24 year old, British born, pregnant for the first time and waiting for her Pakistani husband to receive entry clearance, had decided to risk a long separation in making a transnational marriage because she preferred a Pakistani husband:

I had a few proposals from men here too. They would come round. But their proposals were mainly financial; they all talked about the money they would earn. They said I could continue working; 'You work, and I will work'. It seemed it wasn't really a commitment to a life together. I was not happy with them. A man from Pakistan is different. He knows how to talk respectfully to the elders, he knows his culture, he is more religious, less obsessed with money. Men from here, they are too forward, too confident in talking to women. A man from Pakistan, I don't think he would cheat on me (to AS).

Shareen, too, favoured a Pakistani husband:

I did have other ... proposals from over here, but I said to my Mum, I said, 'You know, boys' understanding is a lot more different to what they are over there... .. Their understanding of their life is a lot more different; they're more laid back... I've just seen lots of people and their marriages here and I think you know you don't probably have that more respect that you probably do with a husband over from Pakistan. I think you understand the culture, whereas if you get married here you never go back to your own country, you never ever show your kids that.... the only way to have that bond is for you to get married to somebody like from over there... I've got my Dad's cousin-sisters here [i.e. first cousins], and I've got my Mum's cousin-brothers and their kids and that here, but I didn't really want to marry them. They're more like dosser sort of boys (to KC).

If young women consider Pakistani men less likely to be financially-driven or 'dossers', young men often consider that a woman from Pakistan is more likely to make a good wife, and that British Pakistani women are too assertive and independent and have lost something of their cultural and religious identity. What is at issue here is partly a question of gendered power relations and also a matter of reinvigorating traditional family culture and religion. Young British Pakistanis are often wary of matches with other British Pakistanis, for fear they will have been contaminated by the 'amoral climate' of the West, an issue of particular importance for the cultural and religious reproduction implied by marriage and childbearing. A spouse from Pakistan who is considered 'more religious' or 'more traditional' will benefit the marriage by preventing the loss of such traits in the next generation. For some British Muslims, the idea of a *rishta* in Pakistan is a connection to 'more Islamic' behaviour. When Gafoora asked one of her relatives why she was looking for a *rishta* in Pakistan, the woman replied with a list of marriages between British-born Pakistanis that had failed, suggesting that one hope is that a Pakistani will bring with them a more committed approach to marriage as a result of growing up in a Muslim country.

Reflecting on his marriage to a cousin from Pakistan, Husnain stressed the importance of a common religious culture in which to raise children by commenting on the cultural differences he assumed would exist in interfaith marriages, here almost implying that marrying British Pakistani women would be like marrying outside the ethnic group:

The problems will arise when you have children. Imagine if I had married a Christian or a Jew. I would want my child to attend the mosque on Friday and be brought up as Muslim, while my wife would want the child to go to church on Sunday and be brought up as a Christian. In the long term, what helps marriages to work is a common religious culture and common family culture (to AS).

Wasim from Bristol, concerned about what he saw as an increasingly morally corrupt 'western' lifestyle of British Pakistani youth, said he would choose to marry 'someone who won't be going out all the time and who'll always be there for me'. He hoped that a wife from Pakistan would be able to teach their children about Islam

and thus compensate for his own lack of religious practice and knowledge. Talib (Ghalib's son, see above) also preferred to marry a woman from Pakistan:

I really wanted to marry with somebody from back home, to keep myself with my origins, you know. I didn't actually really want someone who was, you know – bossy and pushy... That's how people are here, and that's how the Muslim girls especially, the environment that they're brought up in nowadays, I don't think I could have adjusted with one of them – any of them. That's why I really wanted someone from Pakistan. I wanted someone who would be quiet, loving, caring, understanding. You know – someone to be with you in joy. And someone in the family... And that's what Allah Tallah wanted, that's what God wanted, and he set me up with a nice person (to KC).

Outward symbols of religious commitment can be employed to make initial judgements about possible *rishtas*. Omar, from Karachi, was specifically looking for a wife who wears the *hijāb*, and was reassured when he saw that the young British woman suggested for him wore a headscarf; 'I really like it because [in Islam]– to be a wife...nobody can see her like in the dress... she wear in front of me'. Azra, from Bristol, was also seeking a spouse who shared her commitment to Islam. She wanted: 'a kind person, and a beard!.. Because it's religious you see, it's *sunnat*, which means Muslim men have to have a beard'.

A further reason for young British Pakistanis favouring transnational cousin marriages may be that, influenced by the dominant discourse of disapproval of cousin marriage in Britain (see Shaw 2000b), they consider their local cousins 'too close' to marry. Nineteen year old Leyla reflected;

It just wouldn't seem possible to get married to someone in England who's your cousin, because we've got quite open relationships with each other, cousins, and brothers and sisters. It's all like one big family, we just regard it as a family, rather than, you know. And then when it's mentioned – there's a possibility of you getting married – it's a very strange way of understanding. But there [in Pakistan] it's very common (to KC).

While their elders might consider these young British cousins to be potential matches, on the basis of their close kinship and the knowledge derived from

residential proximity, by saying that their cousins are like brothers, or by calling them *bhā'ī*, or 'cousin-brother', they are indicating to their families that these are in fact 'too close' to marry. A certain distance, then, is necessary to make space for affinity within bonds of kinship and locality (cf. Carsten 1997).

Young British Pakistanis rarely have these uncomfortable feelings about cousins in Pakistan whom they may only have seen occasionally. Transnationality thereby doubly influences their negotiations of the position of affinity in kin relations. Exposure to British ideas on close kin marriage may lead to attempts to place the boundaries of the 'marriageable' further away, while transnational marriage introduces potential spouses who are equally close genealogically, but sufficiently distant in other ways to be acceptable partners, whilst also fulfilling the criteria of connection needed to be confident of social approval and the reduction of risk involved in such arrangements.

### **Transnational cousins: Love and romance**

In the Pakistani distinction between 'love' and 'arranged' marriage, love affairs are seen as disruptive to the social order (as in North India, see Moody 2002) while the processes of arranging marriages are controlled by the parents. In practice, however, 'love' and 'arranged' marriages appear as a continuum, with varying degrees of parental or wider family involvement. Cases in which a couple have not met before their wedding day, or else, at the other extreme, have met and married in secret are now increasingly rare.<sup>3</sup> In many apparently conventionally arranged marriages, the young people may have suggested the marriage or at least influenced the decision that led to the proposal; indeed, British Pakistanis sometimes describe as 'arranged love marriages' *rishtas* that began as an attraction between two young people who subsequently asked their families to arrange the marriage (Shaw 2001:324).

The conventional distinction between 'love' and 'arranged' marriage also obscures the role of love and romance within even conventionally arranged marriages. In Pakistani society, love marriages are most likely to occur between

cousins, who, as ‘family’, have opportunities to meet, whereas social contact between unrelated people of the opposite sex is discouraged or more closely controlled (Fischer 1991:102). The relatively greater freedom permitted in social contact with relatives can enable an attraction between cousins to develop, sometimes conflicting with marital decision-making. Periodic return visits to Pakistan to attend family events offer opportunities to young people to meet Pakistani relatives. Farhat, who first met her husband while attending a relative’s wedding in Pakistan, said that for her husband, it was a matter of ‘love at first sight’. Raisa’s family had decided that she should marry her paternal cousin, but on visiting Pakistan, she found him ‘village-y’ and unattractive. Whilst staying with her mother’s relatives, however, a maternal cousin was delegated to show her around, and even to take her to meet her intended spouse. This cousin was handsome, fashionably dressed and articulate, and the pair ended up talking to each other into the early hours of the morning. On her return to Britain, Raisa told her mother how much she liked this cousin, and, at the cost of rifts within the family, her mother broke off the previous agreement and arranged for her to marry the man with whom she had fallen in love.

As across South Asia, there is a fascination with romance among the young in Pakistan (Fischer 1991:102, Shaw 2000a:173). When Amina’s British cousin declared to his parents at the end of a visit to Pakistan that he wanted to marry her, the wedding (including venues, clothes, guests and photographers) was organised in two days. Amina obtained a ‘fast track’ visa, and was soon leaving Pakistan to join her husband in Bristol. Amina described this whole whirlwind period in her life as ‘filmy’ – in other words, like something from a romantic Indian film.

The contracting of an ‘arranged’ marriage can equally be remembered as a time of love and romance, approached ‘along with some trepidation, [with] a degree of eager anticipation and romantic expectation’ (Mines & Lamb 2002: 8). Zobeen was at first hesitant to accept a *rishta* with her mother’s brother’s son in Pakistan, despite the assurances of her close kin who had met him, and insisted that before making a final decision, she be allowed to speak with him over the phone:

You know, it's not in our culture for the boy to approach the girl, or for a couple to go out together before marriage. He was so shy when I spoke to him. And that is what decided it for me. I fell in love with him then (to AS).

Several other young women spoke of the romance of long-distance phone calls with fiancés in Pakistan, while Farhat insisted on having a month in Pakistan before her wedding in which to go out with her fiancé, accompanied by a sister and brother in law. Nabila, in Pakistan, had similarly been uncertain of marrying a British cousin, but said she was swayed when 'he said to my mother that he loved me and he will die in front of my house, and this and that'. Particularly meaningful, for Nabila, was the gold pendant he gave her on their engagement. A romantic impulse is also evident in other young men's actions. Bashir got together with his fiancée's brother in Pakistan, who was marrying Bashir's sister, and the two young men took their future wives out to dinner to present them with rings that they had bought in secret.

Romance is thus compatible with arranged marriage, and even though the relationship between husband and wife is not the only or even the main one that motivates marriages between transnational cousins, it is still important. For Nadeem, the cultural conventions surrounding arranged marriages, including the expectation of love after marriage rather than through premarital intimacy, serves to increase desire:

I think it makes the marriage more attractive, if something is withheld from you before, if you don't know everything about your partner beforehand. If you don't know everything, then there is more excitement. Otherwise, when you get married, there is nothing left. You can end up leading separate lives by the time your children come along (to AS).

Where the long-term interests of more than the couple are involved, where 'you've got the family support as well', it is thus not surprising that, even for those who have had seriously considered marrying out of the family, an arranged transnational marriage has many attractions. Saima could have married an English boyfriend, but finally decided to accept the *rishta* her father had proposed with his brother's son, because, she said, 'I suddenly realised what I would be throwing away'.

## **Broken *rishtas***

Thus far, we have presented close kin transnational marriage as embedded in the emotional bonds of kinship, bound up in *rishta*-connections between trusted relatives. However, just as family ties may be forged or strengthened by marriage, they may also be weakened or broken. Refusals of marriage may generate conflict as parents may be insulted by the rejection of their child. Nabila had several proposals from relatives in Pakistan, who were jealous when she married in Bristol, and tried to sabotage her visa application by withholding documents sent by the British High Commission.

Assumptions of compatibility, trustworthiness and support between close relatives are also not always borne out in practice. If conflict does occur between husband and wife, and particularly if they divorce, the effect can be to cause rifts within the family as other relatives take sides (cf. Carsten 1997). The root of this problem is the 'double *rishta*', meaning a relationship of both blood and affinity, which leads to the fragmentation of allegiances within the family. In Yasmin's short and conflict-ridden marriage, when it was revealed that her husband had never intend to stay with her after securing his immigration status, rifts quickly emerged between those supporting the young woman's wish to divorce, and those (with other *rishta*-connections to the young man's family) who wanted him to be allowed to remain in Britain.

The dangers of the 'double *rishta*' may also undermine the security perceived to lie in the use of kin as referees and informants. One group of sisters in Bristol were scandalised by the engagement of one of their British cousins, a notorious womaniser by their account, to a cousin in Pakistan. The girl's family had apparently not been warned of his behaviour, as mutual kin were too afraid of being blamed for the failure of the *rishta*. The strength of feeling evident in such cases further emphasizes the expectation of close bonds between relatives, even if this expectation is not always fulfilled.

## **Conclusion**

While examples of ‘broken *rishtas*’ illustrate the more negative side of the assumption of closeness between kin, they also demonstrate further the varied interests that may be at play in any particular marriage arrangement. Although we have argued that a strategic perspective on Pakistani arranged marriages is insufficient, Donnan’s analysis (1985, 1988) reveals, importantly, that individual calculations can be obscured by an image of the *birādari* as a group with corporate interests in the matter of its members’ marriages. Here we have attempted to augment this understanding by considering seriously emotional discourse in transnational marriage arrangements, sometimes dismissed as a mere gloss for concerns of status, obligation, the opportunities for migration, or the control of assets.

From this perspective, we can reconcile the different motivations of members of the same family, even with respect to the same marriage: a father arranging his son or daughter’s marriage to his brother’s child may describe this as part of the reciprocity of kinship, for he had earlier remitted money to assist his brother in business, while a mother may emphasize that this match will strengthen the emotional link, weakened by two decades of living apart, with a beloved sister, her husband’s brother’s wife. As women are considered vulnerable to mistreatment, the young woman’s parents may hope that such close relatives can be trusted to treat their daughter well. In addition to this perceived security and (for the Pakistani spouse) the prospect of migration, the agreement of the young people themselves may be facilitated (for the British spouse) by the attractions of cultural and religious continuity, and (for both) by a nascent romantic attraction.

These motivations do not always or neatly coincide in any particular *rishta*. Nevertheless, for many of those involved, a transnational *rishta* (as proposal) may thus represent the desire to secure or maintain *both* material and social advantage *and* emotional connections between people divided by geographical distance. The concept of *rishta* facilitates the creation of transnational networks by combining notions of strategic advantage with the emotional elements of marrying where connections already exist. Pakistani migration stretches networks of kin to the point where connections may break if not reinforced, and marriage is one crucial means of strengthening these bonds. At the same time, marriage to close and trusted kin is

seen as a way of reducing the social and emotional risks of making a transnational marriage, which heighten parental concerns for their children. In these ways, Pakistani transnational marriages highlight emotional aspects of kinship often neglected in the study of South Asian arranged marriage.<sup>6</sup> In the transnational Pakistani marriages discussed here, an emotional relationship between the couple themselves is often evident in the processes of attraction, engagement and the wedding itself, countering the stereotype of arranged transnational marriage, and constituting an additional explanatory factor in the popularity of transnational close kin marriage, even as the dominant emotional ties in motivating such marriages are between parents and their distant siblings, and between parents and the children whose futures they care about deeply.

## Notes

1. Acceptance rates for spousal visa applications, especially for men, have increased since June 1997 (when the requirement of proof that immigration was not the 'primary purpose' of a marriage was abolished), but spouses may still be refused visas; the rules include the requirement of proof of adequate accommodation and financial support without recourse to public funds (Home Office 2001). To guard against the social and emotional risks of a husband's visa application being rejected (including the risk of British women becoming effectively single mothers), families sometimes delay the *rukhsatī* (the bride's leave-taking, which implies cohabitation and the consummation of the marriage) until some months or even years after the signing of the *nikāh-nāma* (Islamic marriage contract) (see Charsley, in press).
2. The minority practice of forcing young people into unwanted marriages is a controversial issue (see Home Office 2000; Menski 1999, 2002; Samad & Eade 2002).
3. This statement sets aside the issue of forced marriage, defined as arranged marriages without consent, as a separate phenomenon.
4. The imagery and narration of the wedding itself is often richly romantic (Charsley 2003).

5. For more on the dangers of 'double *rishta*' see Charsley (2003).
6. One notable exception to this has been the documenting of women's experience of separation from natal kin after marriage (e.g. Jeffery & Jeffery 1996; Raheja & Gold 1994; see also Gallo and Gardner, both in this volume, on other forms of separation).

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