COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

Vol 6 | No 1 | 2025

'They Never Even Thought About Me'

Loneliness, *Tanhai* and Empathic Dissonance in the Lives of Never-Married Muslim Pakistani Women

Ayesha Masood Chaudhry
The Australian National University

ABSTRACT | For never-married women resident in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, the tendency is for their life-stages, needs and desires to be cultivated under the care of their natal families. These women are not physically isolated; neither do they consider the relationships with their natal families as meaningless. However, proclamations of *tanhai* – a situated form of loneliness – are still evident in their narratives. What does it mean to undergo tanhai while still remaining embedded in the everyday relationships within one's natal household? Based on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted with 23 never-married female Pakistani Muslims in Rawalpindi, and through a phenomenological approach, I proclaim tanhai to be a form of subjective affliction. Moral breakdowns within the web of kin relations contribute to differential forms of temporal striving among individual family members, leading to intersubjective empathic dissonance. For upper middle-class never-married women, this dissonance contributes to temporal manifestations of emotional introspection on existing intersubjective dynamics, leading to tanhai.

Keywords: Loneliness; tanhai; emotional introspection; never-married women; Pakistan.

ISSN 2537-9879 | DOI: 10.26686/ce.v6i1.10459

Published online 19 December 2025

Introduction

In a context such as that of the urban middle-class resident in the city of Rawalpindi, Pakistan, marriage acts as a major organiser for residence patterns. An increasing trend towards nuclear family living is evident, exacerbated by the phenomenon of rural to urban migration. Women, in following patrilocal residence patterns, will remain under the care of their parents. Once married, they move to their husband's household. For never-married women, the parental home remains their primary abode. In cases where these women move to other cities to obtain higher education degrees or to take up employment opportunities, female hostels, share houses and extended family households become the usual preference, and regular contact is still maintained with the parental household as a form of an economic and social safety-net. These unmarried women, are, therefore, never completely conventionally 'isolated'. Despite such a scenario, there was a point in my interaction with some of these never-married women where they began to proclaim themselves as suffering through the state of tanhai (noun; adjective: tanha) – An Urdu term, the closest translation of which is loneliness. How does such a 'situated' form of loneliness take shape?

Loneliness, as a concept, has received considerable attention in recent years across Pakistani contexts, especially within the fields of psychology and mental health. The focus within this body of research is broad - including, but not limited to the contexts of social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Butt and Khalid 2023; Tahir, Adil, Bukhari and Rashid 2023), body image and social alienation (Rehman and Jameel 2023), social media addiction (Koyuncu, Unsal and Arslantas 2014), childhood trauma (Rohner et al. 2020), scales of employee satisfaction (Basit and Nauman 2023) and seclusion of the elderly (Victor, Burholt and Martin 2012). The notion of loneliness has also been picked up as a recent topic of conversation in media circles, with urban lifestyles considered as the main point of departure for the proliferation of lonely states (Amir 2023; Editorial 2023; Japanwala 2018; Junaidi 2023; Pakistan Health Parliament 2023; Pulse Pakistan 2023; Yusuf 2020). A common thread running through much of this literature is the lens through which loneliness is conceptualised, with themes of solitude, isolation, loss of meaningful social relations and individual psychological states of deficiency as important points of emphasis. Focus is on the notion of 'isolation' - whether in the form of perceived unwanted physical or social isolation from meaningful relationships, or in an individual's desire to isolate in response to undesirable circumstances. Most of this research is also based on quantitative sources of data, with generalisability across larger samples taken as the major aim. What of those who do not fit the traditional definition of 'isolated', but still express themselves as 'lonely' beings?

Never-married women in Rawalpindi

In a context as marriage-centric as the Pakistani urban landscape, remaining unmarried entails the in/voluntary[1] subversion of a social system that, at its core, takes marriage as its major focal point in determining societal roles and social prestige. Whether the emphasis is placed on religious ideals of modesty (Riaz 2013), principles of caste and biraderi-based endogamy (Alavi 1972; Barth 1959; Chaudhary 2014; Eglar 1960; Lyon 2004, 2019), historical and policy-level reinforcement of the parental unit in nation-building processes (Ansari 2009; Das 1996), or a combination of all mentioned factors, the result is an increased

association of a form of everyday life geared towards marriage-related considerations. In spite of this scenario, instances of singlehood are still evident. I, along with my fellow Muslim never-married interlocutors resident in the city of Rawalpindi, Pakistan, are part of the larger trend of female singlehood/delayed marriage, where, according to Gallup Pakistan's (2023) analysis of the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, the median age for first marriage across Pakistan has been recorded to be at an increase, risen by 1.8 years over the last 30 years, from 18.6 in 1990 to 20.4 in 2017. Between 1990 and 2007, 50% of women aged 25-49 were married by 18 or 19 years old. Over the next decade, 50% of women got married by 19 to 20 years old. This rise is median age at marriage is especially observable in urban Pakistan, with a 2-year increase from 19 in 1990, to 21 in 2017 (Gallup Pakistan 2023).

The current paper is part of my larger PhD project that focuses on the lived experiences of this increasing cohort of never-married Muslim women resident in the city of Rawalpindi, Pakistan. This PhD research is based on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork with 23 of these never-married women, their acquaintances, and their family members resident within this city. Fieldwork was conducted in 2 phases, with the first leg of fieldwork stretching from August 2022 to April 2023, and a shorter follow-up stint from July 2024 to August 2024. Following with the multi-ethnic tapestry of the city – formed due to patterns of migration for education/employment/post-retirement settlement opportunities - the never-married women that are part of my research hail from varying ethnic[2] backgrounds. They have obtained, or are in the process of obtaining higher education degrees and, where possible, are putting these degrees to use professionally. These women are of varying ages, starting from the age of 27, to the age of 58. The main medium of interaction with these women was a hybridised form of Urdu, with instances of English interspersed here and there at different points in conversations. Where relevant, I have used Roman English to quote Urdu statements made by my interlocutors, which are then subsequently translated to English in the following sentences. In many ways, I consider this larger PhD project as an attempt at 'anthropology at home' due to my positionality as someone who has lived in and is familiar with the context that I am exploring. This research project also partially morphed into a means of 'self-exploration' in my assessment of the various life-stages and lived experiences of my never-married interlocutors and their resonances and divergences with my own outlooks and circumstances as a never-married woman.

For the purposes of the current paper, I focus on a particular segment from within my group of interlocutors belonging to what I call the 'upper-middle' class: A socio-economic segment within the city of Rawalpindi composed of the families of post-retiree military and government officials. The group of interlocutors under consideration belonging to this class are in their late-30s, unmarried, and living in their parental households. I converge with these participants in the context of the socio-economic class we belong from. Where I diverge from this group for the purposes of this current paper, however, is on their laments on their states of loneliness, which I have inferred to be a manifestation of the age bracket that these women are in. At 32, I found the age differences between me and these interlocutors a telling aspect informing the notion of tanhai.

In the following sections, I aim to unpack the processes that inform the notion of tanhai for never-married women in Rawalpindi. I begin by establishing the theoretical grounds on which I will be making my argument. I then introduce Salma,[3] a 38-year-old never-married woman, and utilise her narratives to demonstrate tanhai as stemming from forms of 'relational lack' in the form of 'intersubjective empathic dissonance'. I then demonstrate how relational lack can lead to an affliction of subjectivity in the form of tanhai, propagated through individual forms of temporal striving within kin relations.

Empathic dissonance – The relationality of tanhai

Departing from stereotypical conventions of loneliness as a function of physical and social isolation, Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons and (2020) instead take loneliness as a 'relational' subjective affliction. According to them, loneliness manifests itself as a subjective experience stemming from one's perceived positionality within societal relationships, and therefore emerges from a form of 'relational lack', and takes on an affective and temporal quality (Ozawa-de Silva 2021; Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020; Parsons 2020). In lieu of their never-married statuses, single women engender deviant positionalities within the web of intimate relations in which they are active stakeholders. It is in the everyday navigation of such a form of deviant positionality where subjective afflictions arise. How can such forms of affliction be theorised, and in what context do they take on the manifestation of tanhai?

An important emphasis in the current body of research on shifting marriage practices within South Asian middle-class circles is on the tendency to accommodate these developing ideals within, rather than as a break from traditional structures of marriage. In such a context, actors within South Asian urban circles are conceptualised to be situationally placed within larger religious, economic and social structures (Critelli 2012; Donner 2016; Husain 2020; Maqsood 2021a; Marsden 2007). One avenue which until the recent past (Ahearn 2001; Charsley 2013; Maqsood 2021b, 2024; Walter 2022) has had minimal attention within such a theoretical configuration is the centering of the self, i.e. an analysis of subjective experiences, emotional states, and the formation of the self in their interaction with societal counterparts. The present article is therefore an attempt to reconcile the aforementioned gaps in the literature with the aim of arguing for a phenomenological approach in the study of marriage practices within South Asian contexts. Focusing on the situation of singlehood broadens the ambit of analysis from a marriage-centric account to a nuanced study of the varying temporal preoccupations that emerge within an individual's life in response to micro-experimentations with everyday life practices (Mattingly 2014), intersecting to form a version of an individual that is preoccupied with the situated formation of 'self-as-ego' (Abeyasekera 2016; Iqbal and Majeed 2013; Khan 2012). How can one begin to analyse such relational micro-experimentations, and their contribution to the formation of subjectivities?

A drawback of the current body of literature within the domain of phenomenological anthropology is its reliance on Western philosophical epistemologies as the basis of its theoretical underpinnings, which may prove to be contextually dissonant with a Pakistani post-colonial context where the religion of Islam has played a prominent role in the shaping of public and private spheres of life. I therefore take the primary principles of phenomenology i.e. the

privileging of the body, and the formation of the self as being-in- and being-with-the-world (Ozawa-de Silva 2021; Zigon 2007); intersubjectivity (Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Ozawa-de Silva 2021; Ram and Houston 2015); and affective subjectivities (Ozawa-de Silva 2021); and place it in dialogue with the workings of a particular philosopher of Islam specialising in the South Asian Muslim consciousness in relation to the larger colonial realities they were embedded in: Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) - a philosopher, and the holder of the title of Pakistan's national poet.

Iqbal, in his aim towards the instigation of a conscious reawakening for Indian Muslims under colonial rule, pushed for the inculcation of a form of individualism that takes inspiration from the Quran's emphasis on critical reflection on the dynamics of the external world (Khan 2012). This conceptualisation of the individual diverged from modern society's celebration of the Cartesian rational being by placing emphasis on individual striving as a form of a God-given faculty in aspiring for a higher-self. In such a context, the formation of conscious experience for Iqbal hinges on the workings of two dimensions of the internal sense of self: the efficient self, and the appreciative self. The efficient self lives, and plays a role in the external world, and is organised based on notions of serial time - time divided into equally spaced categories. The hegemonic status of serial time as the organiser of the dimension of external 'space' entails the efficient self to orient oneself to its categorised rhythms. The appreciative self, on the other hand, lives within the individual. Time, for the appreciative self, manifests in the form of a unified organic whole, where the past, present, and future converge to form a creative potentiality that pushes the individual towards the pursuit of a reality outside the bounds of serial time. The appreciative self, if tapped into, inculcates a purposive and creative tendency within the individual to aspire towards and search for the ultimate quest of life. For Iqbal, it is the duty of a Muslim to tap into the appreciative self in order to rid oneself of the immediacy of short-term goals in favour of purpose-oriented creative growth (Iqbal and Majeed 2013: 38).

In the context of such a conceptualisation on the formation of the self, the notion of 'thought' for Iqbal is informed by two internalised processes: Feeling and Idea. 'Idea', in the form of intellectual rational thought processes, is the manifestation of the efficient self in its interpretation and categorisation of the processes of serial time within the external world. 'Feeling', on the other hand, is majorly attributed to the workings of the appreciative self. This appreciative self, in its association with the formation of religious experience, takes these feelings (manifestations of internal emotions) as its main source in the formation of conscious experience. At first, idea and feeling seem to be at the opposite ends of the spectrum in their roles within consciousness. However, according to Iqbal, feelings also pertain to cognitive elements in their expression within the external world. Therefore, Iqbal states, 'It would seem that the two – feeling and idea – are the non-temporal and temporal aspects of the same unit of inner experience' (Iqbal and Majeed 2013: 17). The notions of emotion and affect, which are neglected in Cartesian notions of the rational being, form an important part of Iqbal's conceptualisation of the aspiring Muslim.

By utilising Iqbal's expositions on the formation of the self, I aim to contribute to the body of literature that explicates affective and emotional states as important sources for the formation of conscious experience. Tanhai is one such

affective relational subjective state. Tanhai is 'relational' in so far as it emerges in response to perceived precarities from within the web of intimate relations that one is actively a stakeholder of; The 'subjective' component of tanhai becomes evident in the dimensions of 'empathy' that proliferate within these relational dynamics. For Ozawa-de Silva (2021), empathy is an individual's capacity for emotional and cognitive resonance with the Other's subjective state (37). This capacity emerges due to the interplay between an individual's formation of an internal sense of self, and this self's interaction with wider societal counterparts. The capacity to give and to receive empathy, therefore, depends on one's individual positionality to the structures and web of relationships that one is a part of. How can such an intersubjective proliferation of empathy contribute to the notion of tanhai among never-married women?

Tanhai emerges as a temporal manifestation of a subjective process which I term as 'emotional introspection', which arises in the face of 'empathic dissonance' with the temporal striving of individual kin members. By the use of the terms 'empathic dissonance' and 'emotional introspection', I refer to the following aspects: 1) Empathy, as a capacity towards emotional and cognitive resonance, is not just the purview of the empathiser, but is an intersubjective construct salient 'in-between' (Zigon 2021) the web of relations that one is a part of; 2) The expectations on the nature and intensity of empathy to be intersubjectively received and meted out are formed at the intersection of the influence of societal structures and the formation of individual subjective experience (Ozawa-de Silva 2021), forming a multidimensional complex of emotional states; 3) When taking on a phenomenological account of an individual's positionality within the intersubjective dynamic of empathic relations, a competitive interplay between this individual's efficient dimension of self and appreciative dimension of self is evident; 4) In the context of 'moral breakdowns' (Zigon 2007), where the precarious intersubjective dynamic of the proliferation of empathy is disturbed, the tendency towards emotional introspection in the formation of the increase in 'feelings' based on the individual's appreciative self's amplified tendency to creatively navigate the situation; 5) Emotional introspection leads to empathic dissonance due to the perceived realisation of diverging trajectories of temporal striving (Iqbal and Majeed 2013; Khan 2012) among kin members, which leads to differential capacities in emotional and cognitive resonance; 6) Tanhai emerges as a response to the temporally influenced and subjectively proliferated manifestations of empathic dissonance.

In order to elaborate on these theoretical explications further, I attempt to provide a phenomenological analysis of Salma's narratives on her life trajectory and subjective state in the following sections.

Salma's tanha existence

When I got in contact with Salma to ask for her help with my research, she immediately agreed to participate, and excitedly invited me to her home. As the daughter of a retired army officer, she lived with her father, younger brother and sister in a two-storey house situated within a gated-community. This gated community was one of the many found across the city of Rawalpindi maintained by the military as part of a housing scheme intended for army officers to purchase

property and reside in after their retirement. Salma's father, being a retired army officer, also purchased the two-storey house for the family to settle in.

Upon entering the drawing room to Salma's home, I was immediately struck by the opulence in the layout of the large room. Wall-to-wall carpets, velvet sofa coverings, glass tables, and shelves full of glass vases, decoration pieces, and Salma's father's military shields were all laid out in full display. 15 minutes into our ice-breaking conversation, Salma's female house-help came in with a tea-trolley full of items traditionally considered as delicacies to be had with evening tea: mini samosas, chicken pakoras, kebabs, and a sweet halwa made of ground chick-pea flour. Salma insisted that I begin eating, serving each platter individually for me to take food from. Taking on the role of the perfect guest, I exclaimed, 'This food is too much! Why did you go through all this trouble? I am humbled!' To which she replied, 'Oh, don't worry about it. Also, this wasn't me. I didn't make this stuff. We actually got in a new maid today after the previous one had to leave for personal reasons. This is me testing her abilities out. This halwa looks good, doesn't it?'

'It's great!' I replied. 'But it's still too much.'

Dismissing my concerns, she said, 'Don't worry about it. You wanted to talk about me, right? Let's get to it.'

She then began to relay her life story to me.

When Salma was 30 years old, her mother passed away. The occurrence marked a complex juncture in her life. As the oldest sibling of 2 younger brothers and a younger sister, Salma's mother was always adamant to have Salma by her side in dealing with her younger children's problems. For example, Salma was 27 years old when her younger sister, who was able to secure a marriage proposal and get married before Salma, asked for a Khula[4] from her husband within a month of her marriage – citing irreconcilable differences with her in-laws, and a 'suffocating' familial environment. It took Salma's parents years of trips to lawyers and courthouses before they could settle their differences with Salma's sister's ex-marital family.

In the midst of these circumstances, Salma began to observe a peculiar pattern. Whenever the topic for her marriage was broached, Salma's mother used to find ways to avoid talking about the situation. For the handful of marriage proposals that came their way for Salma, Salma's mother always used to find one reason or another for the unsuitability of the match for her. Such a situation carried on until the day her family began arrangements for the marriage of Salma's brother.

Salma mentioned how she vividly remembered the days leading up to her brother's engagement ceremony. According to Salma, her sister-in-law, Sidra, in her interactions with Salma's family, painted the picture of a perfect bride-to-be. Salma did not expect any ill-intentions from Sidra's direction until the day of the ceremony, when Sidra pulled Salma to one side and whispered to her, 'Get married quickly, or I will find ways to kick you out of the house.' Not wanting to create a scene on the day of the ceremony, Salma kept quiet about her sister-in-law's actions. The very forceful threat, however, left Salma reeling.

Salma then recounted how her sister-in-law made true with her threats in many instances over the few years after her marriage. She used to blame Salma for creating rifts between her and her husband (Salma's brother) by back-mouthing about her to her brother. These feelings became further exacerbated

when Salma's sister-in-law asked Salma to take care of her son while she left the house to work, and Salma outrightly refused. Salma states about such a stance, *Kahin to boundary rakhni parti hai. Mai farig hun to is ka ye matlab hai ke mai sab ke kaam karti phirun?* (You need to draw a boundary somewhere. I am free now-a-days, but that doesn't mean I should go around doing other people's jobs). This was the point when, after a few years had passed in an environment of hostility, Salma's parents finally began to think about her marriage. Since Salma had turned 29 by this point, Salma's parents struggled to find an age-appropriate match for her. Salma's father, in an attempt to alleviate the household situation, decided to divide his property among his children before his death. He gave Salma's brother his share in property in the form of a bungalow that he had purchased a few years ago at some distance away from the family home, and told Salma's brother to move into the bungalow with his wife and son. The remaining property, in the form of the two-storey familial household that the family was living in, was placed under the name of the two sisters and younger brother. A year later, Salma's mother passed away.

At 38, Salma lives in the same house with her father, divorced younger sister, and brother. She has completed a diploma degree in psychology, and tried working as a therapist for a year or so before the death of her mother. At one point, however, she stopped taking on clients, as she proclaims, 'I found it very hard to maintain a professional relationship with male clients. I felt extremely uncomfortable, and thought it was in mine and my clients' best interests to discontinue.' For a while, there were only a few reasons for her to leave the house: Grocery shopping, her evening walk, and as part of her responsibility as the female head of household after the death of her mother by attending community events such as weddings and funerals. Nights, according to Salma were the hardest to deal with. She found it hard to fall asleep based on a barrage of anxious thoughts about the future, and then found it difficult to get up in the morning again, as, according to her, 'At this point, I have no aim in life, neither do I have any will power to start something new. I do not feel like facing the day.' Her daily activities consisted of a monotonous routine of supervising the house help in domestic chores and meal preparations.

Salma spent a good hour narrating her life story to me. Interestingly, throughout our conversation, it was her natal family who received the spotlight, and it was this same natal family that Salma seemed to have allowed a huge impact on the way she lived her life. The mention of each family member seemed to have evoked an intensity of emotions within Salma. Her body language was telling here: The restless demeanour, and the anger that I sensed in her tone and words. Even her attire seemed to have betrayed her inner torment in the form of low self-esteem: She wore dark clothes (navy blue and black shalwar qameez[5]), which she pointed towards in a moment of weakness and proclaimed, Aj kal meri aisi hi haalat hai, sub kuch chora hua hai (This is how I am now-a-days, I have left everything). She was also worried about her weight, which she stated to have increased over the past year. What can these narratives on familial dynamics tell us about Salma's inner turmoil?

Rawalpindi's 'upper-middle' class: Societal structures and tanha existences

Salma's family, along with the parents of some of my other interlocutors who were still unmarried in their late-30s, make up the ever-burgeoning social strata in

the city of Rawalpindi which I term as the 'upper-middle class': A 'new' form of middle-class, exhibiting traits characteristic of the middle-class outlook as documented in Pakistani (Maqsood 2017), and other Muslim contexts across the globe - such as the desire for economic stability, a consumerist life-style, and a rise in religious revivalism – but moving into this social role with a considerable amount of economic stability in the form of official benefits meted out to retirees from governmental/military organisations. Most of these are families with older children who are obtaining, or are in the process of obtaining higher education; or who have already secured jobs and/or opportunities for international migration. An important concern for families at this stage is to provide children with economic support in their endeavours, such as higher education and expenses around marriage ceremonies, with parents (usually fathers) picking up post-retirement jobs and starting businesses to support these endeavours. Jobs usually end at the official national age for retirement (60 years), but income is still generated through businesses, and government pension remains a major source of economic support.

As a retired army officer, Salma's father had a similar trajectory. Salma and her natal family belong to the ethnic group of Pashtuns, hailing from the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Salma's father spent most of his career working as an engineer in the Pakistan military while being posted to different areas around the country. Instead of moving back to his parental village in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after his retirement from the military, Salma's father opted for an engineering job in a military-backed organisation in the city of Rawalpindi. He took advantage of his military-subsidised property, moved his family there, and supported his children's higher education in various universities across the Rawalpindi-Islamabad metropolis area. Salma's father worked in this organisation for 10 years before having to resign due to a leg injury which caused him to walk with a limp. At the time of our interview, Salma's father remained at home, tending to household affairs, and forwarding his social life through connecting with other post-retiree officers residing in the same gated community.

It is such a socio-economic backdrop that provides a context for Salma's narratives on her relationship with her parents. Following the patterns of serial time within the class Salma and her family belonged to, the process of looking for potential proposals and arranging marriages is considerably facilitated by the monetary advantages these classes accrued. Wedding expenses are usually fulfilled through the selling of property and assets that the 'economic cushioning' of government/military benefits made possible to purchase. Class endogamy is a preference, where the housing societies that these families settle in provide opportunities for networking and finding potential matches within families of similar monetary backgrounds and life trajectories. Salma's family belonged to the Syed caste – a prestigious social group that traces its lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) family. Exogamous marriages within this caste are strongly discouraged; For women, out-marriage is usually prohibited. For Salma's father, however, caste endogamy was not a preference. As Salma states, *shayed wo army mai rahen hain, ghar se dur, to auron ko dekh kar rawaya badal lya* (Maybe this is because he was in the army and away from home, and so has changed his stance after meeting other people).[6] Despite such a class positionality, why was Salma's marriage delayed?

Intersubjectivity and a daughter's lament

Despite these facilitative circumstances, it was the unexpected 'moral breakdowns' (Zigon 2007) across the lived experiences of Salma's natal family that created opportunities for 'moments of becoming' for the parental unit. In such a context, the tendency for an individual's efficient self to adhere to pressures of serial time in the form of the timely conduction of their ward's marriages falls short in its reluctant navigation of these out-of-control breakdowns. Salma's sister's divorce proceeding was one such rupture. Salma's parents spent years remaining engrossed in trips to courthouses to get approved the unilateral divorce instigated by Salma's sister. Where Salma's father had to be physically present at these courthouse hearings to fight the divorce case, Salma's mother had to directly deal with her younger daughter's emotional breakdown due to the divorce. In doing so, Salma's mother leaned heavily on Salma as a listening ear, and as a source of emotional support on the matter.

This incidence is not the only point where Salma lent a comforting shoulder to cry on for her mother. As the eldest daughter, Salma bore witness to many of the marital difficulties and conflicts with in-laws that Salma's mother had to navigate throughout her marital life. In many cases, Salma became her mother's confidante over the years, where her mother used to find solace in confiding in Salma about her worries. This enabled Salma's mother to have a safe space to vent out about her situation, rather than to create rifts between her natal family and in-laws by relaying her troubles to extended family members. This mother-elder daughter dynamic was evident among a number of my never-married interlocutors. Placing such a dynamic in the context of the mother's own struggles with the manifestations of serial time for a married woman within the patrilocal family system - where the bride is expected to adjust to the in-laws' family dynamics and temporal rhythms - it is understandable that a mother would then find solace with the person she feels most responsible for and whom she can claim ownership over.

Salma's mother's death was a second breakdown that the family went through. According to Salma, this devastating incident occurred at the point where her parents had finally begun to actively look for proposals for Salma. As the eldest female member of the family after her mother, the responsibility for managing the household and acting as the family representative in major community and familial events fell on Salma's shoulders. This change in role for Salma, combined with the grief period that the family went through, caused the priority for the matter of Salma's marriage to take a back-step. How do such intersubjective processes contribute to Salma's state of tanhai?

In the face of life-changing encounters within the collective life of the familial unit, each family member undergoes their own form of 'temporal striving'. For these family members, the uncertainties surrounding these precarious moments brings forth a realisation of the insufficiency of the efficient self in its temporal ordering of everyday life. The appreciative self, therefore, begins to emerge in its creative navigation of these precarious circumstances. The 'in-between' realm of intersubjective familial interaction is where these in-process aspirational selves intersect. By the use of the term 'in-between' I refer to Zigon's (2021) characterisation of the transcendental realm of interaction that holds potentiality for instances of resonance, while also simultaneously making space for differences. Such an outlook moves away from the conceptualisation of

interactions as 'shared meanings', and instead proposes the fostering of 'attunement' between individual outlooks.

For Salma and her father, 'attunement' was evident in their perceived dynamics of the father-daughter relationship. Both were attuned to their adherence to the Islamic duty of fathers as the guardians and caretakers of daughters; What this adherence entailed, however, differed based on their individual aspirational outlooks. Salma acknowledged her father's role as guardian and caretaker to extend not just to her, but to all of his children; However, in dealing with the breakdowns related to these other children's lives, Salma felt her father had given their quandaries precedence over her. According to Salma, her father, although worried about her unmarried status, has tried to compensate his shortcomings on the matter by placing emphasis on his role as her caretaker by fulfilling her material and financial needs. He has thus proclaimed about the matter, *Aurton ko shaadi karne ki kya zarurat hai?* (Why do women need to get married?) - alluding to, according to Salma, his perception on the diminished sexual needs of women, while also placing emphasis on his perceived success in providing an economic safety-net for Salma. It could also be inferred that Salma's father was currently at the stage of retirement after having performed a lifetime of service for the military, and - as was also the case with the fathers of my other unmarried interlocutors from similar socio-economic backgrounds - is at a point in his life where he craved stability over inconvenience. This preference for stability could be a contributing factor to Saba's father's considerable complacency in the matter of Salma's marriage.

Salma, however, found her father's efforts on the matter of her marriage to be lacking. As she proclaims about the perceived neglect she faced from him and her mother over various instances of her life trajectory, *Unho nai mere bare mai socha hi nahi* (They never even thought about me). The dynamics of Salma's perceived dissonance with the empathic sentiments of her family members is evident in the following way: Both Salma and her father converged on the 'idea', or cognitive perception of the need for marriage in a woman's life; However, her father's preoccupation with the ruptures across the lives of his other children (Salma's sister's divorce proceedings, and Salma's elder brother's marital woes) and his wife's death led Salma to perceive a dissonance between her own 'feelings' (Iqbal & Majeed 2013) on the urgency of the matter, and the manner in which she perceived her parents to 'feel' for her unmarried existence in the household. In what circumstances can such a form of empathic dissonance culminate into the subjective affliction of tanhai?

Empathic dissonance and *tanhai*

> *Jaise jaise umar guzarti jati hai, mai apni zindagi ko bar bar peeche mur ke dekhti hun, mai kya thi? Kyun thi? Aur ab kya bungyi aur kyun… Laikin is sawaal ka jawab wazeh laikin buhut uljha hua hai… Zindagi mairi thi, guzaari sub nai thi kyun ke mai khamosh thi… ab waqt badal gya hai umar guzar gyi hai aadatein badal gyi hain ab mai bebaak hogyi hun ab zindagi meri hai laikin ab zindagi nahi hai… aik sanata hai jis mai saya bhi nahi hai, andhera ik bojh hai roshni ik dhoka hai…*
>
> As life goes on, I keep looking back at my life, what was I? Why was I? And what have I become now, and why… The answer to this question is

> now clear but very bothersome… This life was mine, but was lived by everyone else because I was quiet… Now time has changed, life has gone by, habits have changed, I have become bold, life is now mine, but it is not life anymore… There is a lull with no shade, darkness is a burden, light is a betrayal… (Salma, blog entry)

Empathic dissonance, as a form of the affective life of a household, is always an underlying precarity in intersubjective relations. What sets apart the tanha person from the larger web of relations is the acute awareness of empathic dissonance to the extent of its manifestation as a subjective affliction within one's conscious experience. This subjective affliction is instigated and fuelled by the intensity of 'feelings' i.e. the Iqbalian notion of the primacy of the affective forces - characteristic of the appreciative self - which contribute to the formation of a conscious being marked by aspirational introspective tendencies. This intensity of feelings is subjective in so far as the conscious experience formed by these feelings is perceived as distinctive to the people surrounding oneself, and is marked by, what Ozawa-de Silva (2021) calls, the 'failure of empathy': A societal and intersubjective failure in providing the contextual grounds for empathic resonance with individuals on differing temporal paths of striving. This failure of empathy leads to the never-married woman, in her deviant positionality within her natal family in a context where patrilocal practices play a major role in societal organisation, being demarcated to a 'liminal' role i.e. at the margins of the workings of the natal household, with minimal needs and desires. Taking on a phenomenological analysis of the narratives of never-married women, however, brings forth a nuanced picture of the emotional introspection that these women undergo, bringing to light their capacities as 'feeling beings' (Ozawa-de Silva 2021) – a consideration that these never-married women are resentful for their family members to not have. This affective state, in following the temporal characteristics of the appreciative self, takes influence from the dynamics of pure time. A tanha being will therefore be characterised by intense feelings that are directional and purposive i.e. that simultaneously refer to past, present and future preoccupations.

For Salma, the feelings characterising the subjective state of tanhai also takes on a temporal configuration. A hankering to the past is evident in Salma's narratives, especially in her 'resentment' for the perceived lack of empathy from her family members for her unmarried predicament. This form of introspection on past experiences intersects with Salma's 'longing' for a better future in the form of greater empathic sentiments and actions from her family members, along with a hopeful tentative desire for a life partner that can bring long-awaited 'peace' into her life. 'Longing', however, is also accompanied by 'fear': Of the unknown; of the possibility that her future partner turns out to bring more grief in her life rather than peace; and of the looming realisation that as time goes on, so is her 'biological clock' ticking, and her chances for motherhood are slipping away. Motherhood, here, is a major concern, especially due to the perceived passing of serial forms of time in relation to reproductive abilities, making tanhai an especially acute subjective state for older women such as Salma, who was approaching her forties. All these past grievances and future concerns, spurred on by Salma's appreciative self, converge into Salma's present in the form of an introspective evaluation of

her current circumstances, exacerbating her sense of empathic dissonance, and, in turn, her state of tanhai.

The acute awareness of the state of tanhai can also find expression in and be traced in certain performative desires and practices. For Salma, a large source of her tanha existence arose due to the patterns of 'monotony' she perceived her daily routine to have taken on, where she went through a repetitive cycle of management of household affairs during the day, and the difficulties in falling asleep at night. This awareness of her monotonous routine was further exacerbated by her realisation that her life was 'aimless'. *Unho nai kabhi ye zindagi nahi ji, un ko nahi pata ke is zindagi mai kitni aziyat hai* (They have never lived this life, they don't know how painful this existence can get) are the words she used to describe the sentiments of those married women who felt envious of Salma in her unmarried state, perceiving her to be devoid of the woes of marital life. It is important to point out here that Salma's class positionality plays an important role in the formation of this particular outlook. With her economic needs taken care of by her father, and household chores performed by house-help, Salma's sense of aimlessness was further exacerbated.

A manner through which Salma filled her time was through her artistic endeavours – which brings us to the second important performative aspect of tanhai. Salma had completed her Bachelor's degree in Urdu literature, and used her propensity for Urdu writing to work on some very emotionally grounded poetry. She had also been working on a novel loosely based on her own life experiences, which was in the process of publication at the time of my fieldwork. She picked up a love of painting from her mother, and used her spare time to experiment with different forms of abstract and landscape-based art. It is from within such an archive of creative works from where I have been able to quote Salma's laments on her tanha existence. The passage quoted at the beginning of this section is an entry from an online blog that Salma maintains on a social media account, and where she periodically posts snippets of her writing and poetry. This passage very aptly conveys the emotional introspection that Salma undertook at her current life-stage: Empathic dissonance, in the form of her lament on her life 'being lived by others'; looking back to the past repeatedly, in order to understand what went wrong; and fear of the future and the unknown, in the form of the allegories of shade, darkness and light. Such form of artistic endeavours in the face of subjective afflictions is a well-known cultural feat, where a number of major Urdu poets base their poetry on themes of tanhai. For those interlocutors not artistically inclined, the performative dimension of tanhai exhibits in other forms, such as smoking, vaping and binge-eating. For all these cases, the aim is the same: To find a medium of expression for an afflictive subjective state that is otherwise minimally empathised with by the people around them.

Conclusion

Empathic dissonance, as a form of differential capacities of empathy meted out across intersubjective processes, is a phenomenon that is part and parcel of the everyday precarities within kinship relations. The dynamics of care and reciprocity usually keeps these precarities under wraps. However, in true Iqbalian fashion, the inherent ability within individual subjects for the desire to move away from the bounds of finite forms of time in order to strive towards a higher purpose can endanger this delicate intersubjective balance of empathy and care. 'Moral

breakdowns', which usually instigate emotional introspective tendencies, can be differentially navigated by family members, based on their individual journeys towards temporal striving. It is at the intersection of such differential processes of becoming where intersubjective empathic dissonance becomes amplified. Tanhai is a manifestation of such an amplified form of empathic dissonance, characterised by temporally-configured, affectively charged and directional forms of 'feelings'.

Another aim of taking on such a phenomenological approach on the dynamics of empathic dissonance within the web of kin relations is to make a contribution to the existing literature on human agentive capacity by proposing an affective foundation for introspective deliberation. I do so by utilising Iqbal's explications on the notion of the aspirational being, where time, as perceived by the appreciative self, is conceptualised as an open potentiality for moments of 'becoming', tempered in the face of the constraints of the external world as ordered through serial forms of time (Khan 2012). Through such an approach, I therefore am moving away from the conceptualisation of the lives of unmarried females and their kin members under consideration as unidimensionally deterministic of particular notions of societal and historical interventions/influences or individual action in favor of the formation of conscious experience as the point of analysis. The phenomenological study of the notion of tanhai, as an afflictive manifestation of such a formation of conscious experience, can provide insights into an introspective locus of agency otherwise neglected if one limits one's focus on performative or behavioral manifestations of loneliness.

Acknowledgements

Funding for this PhD project was made possible through scholarships granted by the Australian National University, and fieldwork funds released by the School of Culture, History and Language at the Australian National University.

Notes

1. I use the world in/voluntary here to avoid labelling a direct form of causality between the phenomenon of rising forms of neo-liberal ideals, desires for 'independent' lifestyles and successful careers, and the subsequent voluntary delays or opting out of marriage, as much of the literature of singlehood in Western contexts points out. The aim of the current research project is to show just how contextually derived these marriage-related processes are.

2. By the term 'ethnic' background, I refer to the area of origin of my interlocutors from one of the six linguistically/geographically distinct ethnic groups demarcated as provinces within Pakistan: Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit Baltistan and Azad Kashmir.

3. A pseudonym has been used to ensure the anonymity of the interlocutor and the confidentiality of data.

4. Islamic form of divorce that a woman is permitted to take from her husband through a court of law.

5. The Pakistani traditional dress usually worn in varying forms and fashions by the average urban woman.

6. This outlook can be considered to resonate with the larger documented phenomenon of the inculcation of a 'middle-class' outlook among the Ashraf castes, exacerbated by colonial influence on social stratification across South Asia (Levesque 2023; Pernau 2013).

References Cited

Abeyasekera, Asha L.
2016. Narratives of choice: Marriage, choosing right and the responsibility of agency in urban middle-class Sri Lanka. *Feminist Review* 113: 1–16.

Ahearn, Laura M.
2001. *Invitations to love: Literacy, love letters, and social change in Nepal*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Alavi, Hamza
1972. Kinship in west Punjab villages. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 6(1): 1–27.

Amir, Syed
2023. Loneliness, the modern curse. *Pakistan Link*. https://www.pakistanlink.org/Opinion/2023/June23/23/03.HTM

Ansari, Sarah
2009. Polygamy, Purdah and political representation: Engendering citizenship in 1950s Pakistan. *Modern Asian Studies* 43(6): 1421–1461.

Barth, Fredrik
1959. *Political leadership among Swat Pathans*. London: Athlone Press.

Basit, Ameer A. and Shazia Nauman
2023. How workplace loneliness harms employee well-being: A moderated mediational model. *Frontiers in Psychology* (13).

Butt, Sijil S. and Ruhi Khalid
2023. Unsung heroes of cancer care: Loneliness, social support, and quality of life in informal cancer caregivers during COVID-19 pandemic. *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research: PJPR* (38)2: 207–236.

Charsley, Katharine
2013. *Transnational Pakistani connections: Marrying 'back home'*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Chaudhary, Muhammad A.
2014. Interpreting honour crimes in Pakistan: The case studies of the Pukhtun and the Punjabi societies. *Anthropos* 109(1): 196–206.

Critelli, Filomena M.
2012. Between law and custom: Women, family law and marriage in Pakistan. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 43(5): 673–693.

Das, Veena
1996. National honour and practical kinship: Of unwanted women and children. In *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India.* Delhi: Oxford University Press. Pages 55–83.

Desjarlais, Robert and C. Jason Throop
2011. Phenomenological approaches in anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40(1): 87–102.

Donner, Henrike
2016. Doing it our way: Love and marriage in Kolkata middle-class families. *Modern Asian Studies* 50(4): 1147–1189.

Editorial
2023. Combatting loneliness: Feelings of isolation can contribute to anxiety and depression, amplifying the risk of dementia and suicide. *The Express Tribune*. https://tribune.com.pk/story/2447070/combatting-loneliness

Eglar, Zekiye S.
1960. *A Punjabi village in Pakistan*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gallup Pakistan
2023. Ever-married women by age of first marriage: Pakistan demographic and health survey trend data. *Gallup Pakistan*.

Husain, Fauzia
2020. Halal dating, purdah, and postfeminism: What the sexual projects of Pakistani women can tell us about agency. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45(3): 629–652.

Iqbal, Muhammad and Javed Majeed
2013. *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam,* edited by Muhammad S. Sheikh. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Japanwala, Natasha
2018. Alone among millions. *The News*. https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/566595-alone-among-millions

Junaidi, Ikram
2023. WHO forms 11-member commission to combat loneliness. *Dawn*. https://www.dawn.com/news/1789690

Khan, Naveeda A.
2012. *Muslim becoming: Aspiration and skepticism in Pakistan*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Koyuncu, Tugce, Alaettin Unsal and Didem Arslantas
2014. Assessment of internet addiction and loneliness in secondary and high school students. *Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association* 64(9): 998–1002.

Levesque, Julien
2023. *Anjuman, jami'at,* and association: What Sayyid organizations tell us about associational forms among Muslim caste groups. *Contemporary South Asia* 31(3): 483–497.

Lyon, Stephen M.
2004. *An anthropological analysis of local politics and patronage in a Pakistani village*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.

Lyon, Stephen M.
2019. *Political kinship in Pakistan: Descent, marriage, and government stability*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Maqsood, Ammara
2017. *The new Pakistani middle class*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Maqsood, Ammara
2021a. Love as understanding: Marriage, aspiration, and the joint family in middle-class Pakistan. *American Ethnologist* 48(1): 93–104.

2021b. Love in liminality: The modes and spaces of intimacy in middle-class Pakistan. *South Asian History and Culture* 12(2-3): 261–277.

2024. The work of time: Personhood, agency, and the negotiation of difference in married life in urban Pakistan. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 30(1): 58–74.

Marsden, Magnus
2007. Love and elopement in northern Pakistan. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13(1): 91–108.

Mattingly, Cheryl
2014. *Moral laboratories: Family peril and the struggle for a good life*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Ozawa-de Silva, Chikako
2021. *The anatomy of loneliness: Suicide, social connection, and the search for relational meaning in contemporary Japan*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Ozawa-de Silva, Chikako and Michelle A. Parsons
2020. Toward an anthropology of loneliness. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 57(5): 613–622.

Pakistan Health Parliament.
2023. Social media: The new chain of loneliness & low-self esteem. *Pakistan Health Parliament*. https://healthparliament.pk/social-media-a-new-chain-of-lonliness-and-low-self-esteem/

Parsons, Michelle A.
2020. Being unneeded in post-Soviet Russia: Lessons for an anthropology of loneliness. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 57(5): 635–648.

Pernau, Margrit
2013. *Ashraf into middle classes: Muslims in nineteenth-century Delhi*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Pulse Pakistan
2023. Risk of anxiety and depression increases in loneliness and Isolation. *Pulse Pakistan*. https://pulsepakistan.com/risk-of-anxiety-and-depression-increases-in-loneliness-and-isolation/

Ram, Kalpana and Christopher Houston
2015. Introduction: Phenomenology's methodological invitation. In *Phenomenology in anthropology: A Sense of perspective*, edited by Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston, 13–41. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Rehman, Sadaf and Rabia Jameel
2023. Appearance anxiety and loneliness: The mediating role of rejection sensitivity in patients with alopecia areata in Lahore Pakistan. *Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association* 73(4): 800–803.

Riaz, Shamreeza
2013. Shariah perspective on marriage contract and practice in contemporary Muslim societies. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 3(3): 263–267.

Rohner, Ronald P., Diane L. Putnick, Alex D. Molaver, Sumbleen Ali, Butt, Mussafa M. Butt, Dara M. Ibrahim, Cecilia Aurino, Marjolijn J. M. Blom, Fatima H. Darwesh, Stefania Auricchio, Araz H. Radha, Maria C. Miranda, Kari Adamsons and Vincenzo Paolo Senese
2020. Psychological maladjustment mediates the link between remembrances of parental rejection in childhood and loneliness in

adulthood: A cross-cultural comparative study. *International Journal of Psychology* 55(4): 590–600.

Tahir, Wajeeha, Adnan Adil, Imran Bukhari and Sarnina Rashid
2023. Impact of COVID-stress on loneliness mediated by paranormal beliefs. *Pakistan journal of social and clinical psychology* 21(2): 28–35.

Victor, Christina R., Vanessa Burholt and Wendy Martin
2012. Loneliness and ethnic minority elders in Great Britain: An exploratory study. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 27(1): 65–78.

Walter, Anna-Maria
2022. *Intimate connections: Love and marriage in Pakistan's high mountains*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Yusuf, Huma
2020. Lonely society. *Dawn*. https://www.dawn.com/news/1583317

Zigon, Jarett
2007. Moral breakdown and the ethical demand: A theoretical framework for an anthropology of moralities. *Anthropological Theory* 7(2): 131–150.

2021. How is it between us? Relational ethics and transcendence. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27(2): 384–401.

Ayesha Masood Chaudhry
Department of Anthropology
School of Culture, History & Language
College of Asia & the Pacific
The Australian National University
ayesha.chaudhry@anu.edu.au