

BOOK REVIEW

Qureshi, Kaveri (2016) *Marital Breakdown among British Asians – Conjugalities, Legal Pluralism and New Kinship*, London: Palgrave Macmillan. 324 pp.

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While a number of studies have investigated immigrant marriages during the last decades, much less attention has been devoted to divorce. That is somewhat surprising, given that family conflict and divorce provides a fascinating peephole into the turmoil that individuals and families may face when they relocate from one part of the world to another. Kaveri Qureshi addresses this issue in her book *Marital Breakdown among British Asians*. Based on an impressively rich empirical material, she unpacks processes of family dissolution from the perspectives of both the first and the second generation and from the viewpoint of not only women but also men and even (in small measure) children.

Kaveri Qureshi, now lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, works on issues of health, gender and families. Indeed, her interest in divorce was sparked when, in her doctoral research on chronic illness among British Pakistanis, she learned that a large share of the health problems encountered coincided with disturbed marital relations and divorce. These findings did not align well while the dominant narrative of South East Asians as being the custodians of the traditional family.

The book starts out with providing the quantitative backdrop, which shows that divorce rates in South-Asian groups in the UK have been steadily increasing over the last decades. Qureshi then goes on to unpack the tremendously differentiated landscape underlying these figures. Thus young professional women raised in the UK may divorce for much the same reasons as the average Briton. In contrast, older migrant women may shy so much away from the stigma of divorce, as to end up living for years side by side with husbands from whom they are totally estranged.

The book includes a rich variety of cases. It does so by drawing on three periods of fieldwork in selected British localities, spanning the period from 2005 to 2014. Building in large part on life story interviews – conducted in English, Urdu or Mipuri – a central force of the book is to provide insights into (troubled) individual and family life as it unfolds over a decade. In total, 51 women and 23 men are included in the study, with almost half of them followed over

time. Qureshi also sat in on some 40 mediation sessions in a large sharia council and talked with activists, lawyers and marriage counselors.

Drawing on literature applying both a majority and a minority perspective, the book moves the reader through the – sometimes long and arduous – processes of family breakup. Hence, it includes chapters on issues as marital conflicts, actions to keep couples together (through, for example, family mediation), and looks in detail at the divorces themselves. Providing detailed insights into family dynamics, the book points out, for example, that having a love marriage rather than an arranged one may mean less access to kinship support in case of problems. The book also unpacks how the complex landscape of mobility may affect marriages. Thus, some women, raised in the UK, may strategically opt for spouses from the sub-continent in order to gain the upper hand in a marital relationship to a marriage migrant spouse.

Centrally, the book provides a study of 'Muslim divorce' from outside a sharia council perspective. While also including field work from this context, its main perspective is with the women and men whose marriages fail. It thus provides important documentation of how individuals may hold very divergent interpretations of 'what counts' in Muslim divorce matters: While some consider a civil divorce as holding Islamic validity, others do not, making it necessary for them to end their Muslim marriage in a religiously sanctioned way. Some indeed find themselves in a 'grey zone', feeling uncertain about whether or not they are still Islamically married – a topic which may become particularly pertinent if women later want to enter into new relationships. With a perspective on the less institutionalized – mostly family based – forms of dispute resolution, the book provides an alternative to research based solely on fieldwork from within the British sharia councils. In fact this approach has led to what Prakash Shah (2013) has described as the 'shariatization' of studies of legal pluralism. While such venues indeed play a role when it comes to immigrant divorce, this study points to their role being smaller and their authority more limited than is commonly perceived.

Proposing a four-fold typology for the reasons behind divorce, the book provides a discussion of different types of processes underlying the family conflicts. In this discussion, the book also includes mainstream divorce literature to bring out the many similarities between these South-Asian divorces and family break-up in majority families rather than over-focusing on, for example, issues of 'culture'. Especially in divorces amongst individuals, raised in the UK, a lot of the adjustment to divorced life can be understood as individuals grappling with mainstream issues such as how to co-parent after a divorce, and how to adjust to the new reality of half- and step-siblings.

Throughout the book, Qureshi draws attention to the complex and often highly gendered family dynamics. Her ability to provide also the severely under-researched male perspective is indeed rare. We learn, for example, of Afzal. While his ex-wife (whose life is chronicled in other chapters) got empowered by the divorce, and was able to rebuild her life around the children and her female friends, Afzal's life had become 'unremittingly miserable' after the family break-up. Sharing a flat with other single Pakistani men, he lived much of his life out of his taxi cab. As his ex-wife had taken out a court order to prevent him from seeing his children, he was ruminating over whether life was indeed worth living any more.

In other cases, women, too, were badly hurt both by highly troubled marriages, and by divorces that could take years to complete. Commonly the ones initiating the divorces, however, a man is quoted for saying that in the UK: 'Even the aunties are getting divorced these days... It is something in the water here, once the women drink a drop of that water they want their freedom' (p. 69).

I thoroughly enjoyed the book, and especially the first-person narratives of how individuals, over the course of a decade, handled their lives. From accounts of women bowing to family pressures to try to keep families together despite severe conflict, over marriages nevertheless

unravelling, to the manifold ways in which family members reconstruct their post-divorce lives and the accompanying analysis, the book provides a rich and timely insight into the turmoil of immigrant families breaking up.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Reference

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