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ISHA'S WAIT: Money, Love, and Kinship in the Wake of Domestic Violence in India

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"Once he starts sending money, he will start loving," Isha says once again, repeating the statement to emphasize the point and elicit my confidence in her "plan." The look on her face is an all-knowing one that seems to suggest that she knows that this is indeed what will happen, that this is how it works.

Isha and her sister,[1] two young Hindu *Dalit* (ex-Untouchable) women of the Dhobi (washermen) subcaste, were married at eighteen years to two husbands of the same caste in a town in the state of Rajasthan, India. Following multiple episodes of physical beatings, economic exploitation, verbal abuse, and coercive control, the parents brought the two sisters back to live in their natal home in an overcrowded residential colony in Old Gurgaon, in the state of Haryana. Isha has an ongoing case against her husband on two counts of domestic and dowry-related violence. Through the legal action, her main hope is to secure a monthly "maintenance" payment from her husband,[2] Heera, who has a stable government job as a jailer in a city prison in Rajasthan, secured within a "Scheduled Caste" quota.[3] The court-case proceedings—expensive, slow-moving, uncertain, and further disrupted by the pandemic—form the backdrop to the ethnographic story of this essay. In the foreground stands Isha, back in her

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natal home and living with her parents who run a clothes-ironing station servicing an upper-class residential complex in the city.

As a legal concept in India, "maintenance money" has been understood as a "civil remedy" for the injury and harm caused by domestic violence that can sustain women's exit from abusive marriages. While the broader patriarchal practices around inheritance, property, employment, and unremunerated domestic labor that make women economically vulnerable and dependent within martial and affinal kin structures remain unchallenged, the supposed compromise of maintenance money hinges on the promise of offering a modicum of financial independence and self-sustenance for separated women (Roychowdhury 2020; Mandal 2024; Basu 2015). In this essay, I show that while these are indeed the stated goals in Isha's demand for maintenance, her demand also entails imaginations and speculative wonderings about the force of money in reviving, sustaining, and nourishing kin relationality and conjugal love to ultimately yield reconciliation. Intertwined with Isha's hope for maintenance money is her hope that forcing Heera to pay will force him to improve his conduct, feel love for his family, realize his role and responsibilities as a householder man and husband, and compel him—emotionally, socially, and financially—to ask Isha and their daughter to return to him. Isha's desire for reconciliation is not about her passive forgetting and forgiving of subjugation and violence suffered through the mere restitution of conjugal rights. Instead, I demonstrate, it tells the story of her agentive and strategic faith in the power of money to engender social, moral, and behavioral correction in the abusive husband such that it will deliver to Isha the hallowed promises of economic stability, sexual and emotional intimacy, and social respectability through marriage and rescue her from her current kin-dislocated life. This is analytically salient. Money features not just as a compulsion to stay in an unhappy marriage and endure violence, as is commonly observed, but as a potential tool with which to solve the problem of violence and "fix" the marriage.

In the essay, I trace the ways in which different streams of money flow, unflow, or mis-flow to and from Isha. Following these flows and non-flows over a period of two years, I probe the role money comes to play in the experience of domestic violence, its aftermath, and the imaginations of the way out of it. Anthropologists have long questioned the ideological opposition between the realms of money, market, and economics, on the one hand, and those of emotions, social relations, and moralities, on the other, demonstrating how they "might, in fact, be deeply intertwined" (Cole 2009, 111). How money is earned, how it is

spent, who spends it, who it is spent on and to achieve what ends is tied up with social codes, morals, and values (Parry and Bloch 1989). Studying money in its material, relational, and affective dimensions, I locate the various gendered subjectivities and moralities that dictate the social code of how money *should* flow within the family, and the sense of dislocation experienced when it does not flow along this normative path. I follow the rich anthropological scholarship that ascribes an "agentive force" to money—money is not a neutral economic resource flowing in a frictionless form from one person to another, but a socially vital, emotionally charged, and morally enlivened resource culturally understood as possessing an agency of its own (Gamburd 2004; also see Cornwall 2002). In fact, money can prove a particularly malleable and liquid substance, capable of opening space for renegotiation and readjustment within social relations—undermining some, while reinforcing others that matter (Zharkevich 2019). This implies that the directions and manner of money flows are not just shaped by extant social systems but can also shape new social norms, orientations, relations, and personhoods (Kwon 2015; Walsh 2003). It is in this agentive capacity of money—to not just reproduce but also transform relations and people—that Isha places her hopes.

I listen to Isha as she talks about *pyaar*, or love, and domestic violence as arising from the absence of its *ehsaas*, or feeling/realization, by the abusive husband. The anticipated maintenance money is infused with the hopeful imagination that it will generate both *pyaar* and its *ehsaas*. It is evoked as an effective tool to fix the disrupted flows of reciprocal love, care, and material support within the marital home, and restore the heteronormative order of kin roles, responsibilities, and reciprocities. This maintenance money, initially flowing from afar following a legal mandate, is imagined as eventually translating into more natural, proximate, and embodied flows of love, service, and care within a repatched conjugality and domesticity.

Such a smooth-flowing narration of the imagined sequence of events belies the fact that court sanctions for maintenance money are notoriously difficult to obtain and even more difficult to enforce, owing to the workings of a patriarchal and "incapable" legal system (Roychowdhury 2020; Banerjee et al. 2022). Claimants constantly grapple with legal delays and deferments, as well as the evasions or counterclaims of the offending husbands. However, as Megha Sharma Sehdev (2018) argues, a sole focus on "outcomes" leaves us with an impoverished understanding of the social life of domestic violence laws. Situating her research "in the interim," she draws attention to the "productivity of failed or unfulfilled

legal promises" and explores everyday textures of "hope in abeyance" (Sehdev 2018, 8). Such a focus invites us to think about the indefinite period of Isha's wait for maintenance money to flow and for it to then *do* the things she imagines as constituting an ethnographic space. My essay is situated within this space of waithood. Her waithood is not experienced as a problem of excess time filled with boredom and idleness, as has been noted for unemployed men cast aside by the neoliberal economy (Mains 2011; Masquelier 2019; Jeffrey 2010). Isha is very busy, shuttling between various low-end service-sector jobs in the city, balancing childcare, the heavy load of domestic work re-assigned to her in her natal home, and the running of her legal case. Nevertheless, her waithood manifests as an "existential limbo" (Haas 2017, 77), the awaited decision a "matter of life and death." However, this is not just a landscape of despondency and despair but also one marked by "cultivating hope" (Mattingly 2010, 22). This is a hope sustained by her imagination of what maintenance money will do. For long, I struggled to understand this imagination and the optimism that underwrites it, especially given well-founded suspicions that the maintenance money may never come or worse, provoke patriarchal backlash in the form of increased violence (Mandal 2014). With time it became clear that Isha's claim about money engendering love and disciplining is not just about what will happen but how she can agentively "construct a narrative" (Mains 2011, 44) and "redefine terms of belonging" (Masquelier 2019, 28), so that she may wait in her natal home where she has exceeded her welcome. It allows her to interpret and narrate her kin-dislocated present as oriented toward an improved future based on a possible return and reconciliation with the marital family.

There exists a rich body of scholarship on domestic violence in India that focuses on laws and courtroom proceedings (e.g., Basu 2012; Mandal 2014). At the same time, scholarship has recognized the need to study the "other" of law: paralegal, extra-legal, and even illegal spaces where NGOs, counseling centers, brokers, families, local headmen, or elders operate to variously interpret, implement, or subvert the law and its afterlife (e.g., Basu 2015; Kowalski 2022; Oza 2022). Pushing this further, my ethnography explores another "other" of law—the affectively charged landscape of private thoughts, hesitations, desires and bitter anger that occupy the complainant's heart (*dil*) and mind (*dimaag*), where legal definitions, provisions, and possibilities come to be personally owned and imaginatively reworked within a love and kinship calculus. I draw on fourteen months of postdoctoral fieldwork conducted in Gurgaon in north India as part of a project on domestic violence, working with housewives and

"working moms" in posh gated complexes, young migrant professionals living in girls' hostels and "paying guest" accommodations, domestic workers in tenement blocks, local women in the "urban villages" that intersperse the modernizing city. In this essay, I focus singly on Isha, who I was first put in touch with by a gated colony resident I had interviewed. Our first WhatsApp call lasted a long three hours, where Isha spoke with infectious humor and startling frankness. We started meeting regularly at her parents' or her uncle's home, my unmarried status a constant source of curiosity and confusion for all, and also generative of animated discussions and advice-giving.

In the essay, I make the following interrelated arguments: Domestic violence can become less about violence and more about the failed social relations and frayed social worlds it creates. Money constitutes a crucial site where the experience of violence as the misalignment of love and kinship is registered. Then the legal demand for maintenance money becomes not just a monetary demand for sustenance and independent survival but also a social and moral critique of the violence suffered, articulating the interpersonal hurt, desires, and moral deservedness of the wife. Money, as I will outline below, operates as a substance of kinship that does not just reflect existing kinship but also sustains imaginations of transformed kinship futures. Importantly, the awaited money can create the space to agentively wait for the ethical correction of the husband and the wider marital kin. Ultimately, this complicates ideas of exit from violent marital homes and articulates love- and kin-forward visions of justice and moral retribution that exceed the frame of the criminal justice system. This is a vision based on the complainant's own ideas of redress, reform, repair, and reconciliation that are deeply gendered, interpersonal, and structurally shaped by the patriarchal make of both the natal and marital homes.

FRACTURED KINWORLDS AND THE SUBSTANCE OF MONEY

Reconciliation is a common cry in cases of domestic violence in South Asia, shared by the family-preserving courts and the family-dependent victim alike, and one that reverberated throughout my fieldwork. Anthropological scholarship has focused on the way legal and paralegal spaces institutionally mediate reconciliation—by providing "emotional fixes" (Gardner 2022) and "tutoring" women in "kinwork" toward "liveability" (Lemons 2016), with the aim to uphold the contractual integrity and social sanctity of marriage (Basu 2015). Such measures are critiqued to be ambiguous, tentative, and contradictory in how they render the violence suffered secondary and further violence by returning women

to unhappy, even dangerous homes—a failure of gender justice (Basu 2015). At the same time, however, it is also important to "vernacularize" understanding of gender-based violence, as Julia Kowalski (2016) argues in her work on counseling centers, by putting women's own desires for kin and intergenerational familial dependencies front and center of the analysis. Violence, she notes, can come to be registered as "neglect" and absence of care that results in "disordered households" which must be reordered by paying attention to "kinship ideologies" of hierarchy, reciprocity, and service, not just within the conjugal units but also engaging wider kin networks of affines, parents, siblings, and children. Such an approach is an important rejoinder to Westernized discourses in academic scholarship and NGO advocacy that places emphasis on women's rights, empowerment, and independence. "Interdependence," as Kowalski (2016, 66) writes, "produces both families and people." Here, she is echoing James Ferguson's (2013) important "declaration of dependence" that discusses the radical need for vital interdependencies to create meaningful personhood and social life. Writing about the social primacy of kinship in Chile, Clara Han (2011, 13) notes, "to be constituted through family is not a choice; it is how one inhabits the world." Then, even in situations of intimate violence that cause emotional, physical, and material hardships and hurt, people can remain tied up in the "thickness" (Povinelli 2006) of kin relations and the network of obligations, care, and hopes they constitute (Pinto 2014; Banerjee 2019).

It is within this context that we can appreciate Isha's plan for reconciliation: Heera's stable government job offers the possibility of demanding substantial maintenance money from him and of reasonably hoping that the courts will enforce this demand. Beyond the share of economic support this will offer Isha and her daughter, it will provide tangible material means to make more substantial claims of maintenance on Heera as a husband and father, and a tool to discipline him into being a good husband and good father—"When they have to pay, they all fall in line. Then they start saying sorry. A realization starts to fall on them." Here, the specific character of Heera's money proves crucial. Unlike commonly observed cases where the income of the husband is difficult to determine—either because it is unsteady or undocumented or difficult to isolate from the collective income of joint families (Basu 2015, 121), the steady and publicly documented, state-sanctioned income of the husband is known both to the claimant and the law. This legibility inspires confidence in the possibility of money to flow from the estranged husband, which in turn feeds the possibility for kin re-making to be materially felt and envisioned. It also explains the

socially exceptional support extended to Isha by her natal family to pursue legal action, when in other cases women have experienced "estrangement" from kin (Roychoudhury 2020, 112), even violence (Banerjee et al. 2022). In fact, the very idea of "putting a case" arrived on the back of the promise of this money, and the parents took out loans to furnish the requisite legal fees from their upper-class customers, one of whom also provided the contact for the lawyer.

Kinship, as we know, is not a natural, solid, and unchanging given. Feminist and critical kinship scholars have long emphasized how it is made and unmade by the *doing* of kinship through the performance of relatedness and reciprocities. An important aspect of this phenomenon is the sharing of "substances," such as food, gifts, bodily fluids like blood, semen, and breastmilk (Sahlins 2013; Carsten 1995; Lamb 2000). Ina Zharkevich (2019) has asked if money, too, can become a "substance of relatedness" through which kinship is constituted and re-constituted—embodied, performed, reinforced, and altered. Studying remittances in Nepal, she finds that the money wired from abroad proves instrumental in maintaining and replenishing kin ties, especially in the absence of physical proximity or cohabitation. Andrea Wright (2020) has studied the ways in which the gold sent back by male Indian immigrants in the Gulf allows them to perform their familial duties as brothers, fathers, and sons, thereby themselves maturing into adulthood. The crucial role of money in performing kin intimacy, care, and obligations has been variedly explored in contexts of familial separation because of economic migration (Kwon 2015; Coe 2011; Hannaford 2017). In fact, even in cases where migrants are unable to earn enough to send remittances home, the "striving" to earn money contributes to building "responsible" personhood and the maintenance of social relations of duty and reciprocity (Fioratta 2015). Money can thus sustain kinship even in its absence, as long as there is the exhibited desire to earn and share it.

In this essay, I trace the role money comes to play as a substance of kinship in the case of domestic violence—in the making of fractured kinworlds and the imagination of their suturing. Here, crucially, the nature of kin separation is different, haunted by the memories of past violence endured and the threat of its future reoccurrence. The flow of money is different too, as it is not voluntary but legally decreed. At variance, then, the essay does not concern itself with how money flows to testify to the endurance of kinship ties across physical distances (i.e., testifying the "thicknesses" of blood). Rather, inversely, it follows Isha as she wonders if money—forced to flow by law, social pressure, and circumstance—can make the imperative of good kinship visible, felt, and realized.

I ask what exact mechanisms underpin Isha's "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) that maintenance money, when and if forthcoming, will lead to kin disciplining. I probe how money relates to questions of *pyaar*, or its lack, and in what exact ways money is seen as capable of creating its *ehsaas*, such that it corrects bad behavior, solves the problem of violence, and brings about kin reconciliation.

The striking point with all this money talk is that the money is not actually flowing. It is only hoped that it will flow and perform its supposedly vital role in marital kin rehabilitation. Crucially, then, the kinship evoked here is not one already present, performed through everyday actions, reciprocities, and sharing rituals (Carsten 1995). Rather, it is defined by a set of imaginations about possible "kinship futures" (Cooper 2018). The present, then, becomes a period of "active waiting and patience" sustained by ideas of what Han (2011, 8) calls the "what if" and the "possible"—"an indeterminacy of lived relations in the present," where domestic relations are considered not just for what they are but also for their potentiality. In a similarly speculative vein, it is not Heera the husband and father he is, but, rather, the husband and father he can potentially become in the future. Contributing to emerging scholarship that recognizes the role of imagination, faith, and ideology in the constitution of kinship even in the absence of its everyday experience or practice (Cooper 2018, Carsten 2000, Härkönen 2023), my essay maps the role of money as a substance of kinship in creating and sustaining these imaginations.

Central to Isha's imagination of sutured kinship futures, I argue, is the idea that money has corrective potential. The fluid and agentive substance of money can be directed to flow in such a manner that it creates a set of ethical and affective realizations, or *ehsaas*, that engender the desired individual and kin transformations. Such an understanding rests on the ways in which the perceived malleability of the substance of money (Zharkevich 2019) is expected to interlock with the perceived malleability of personhood (Maqsood 2024) and the malleability of kinship (Kowalski 2016). It is important to point out that these imagined transformations in no way prove structurally transformative. Continuing to operate within heteronormative visions of kinship, masculinity/femininity, and love, what is sought is a transition from bad kinship to good kinship. Ultimately, however, these transformations remain elusive for Isha. Lawyers and NGO activists I spoke to said that it was not uncommon for courts to order wives to return to abusive homes, but they remained skeptical about Isha receiving her maintenance or a reformed husband, adding that such hopes for abuser reform are common but often end in disappointment (also see Roychowdhury 2020, 7). Against such

odds, Isha's optimistic speech reveals the active role of the imagination, desperation, and hope in endowing the substance of money (which may not come) with a singular disciplinary force (which it may not possess) to narrate her present waithood and legal efforts on her terms.

Writing about women's experience of marriage in Pakistan, Ammara Maqsood (2024) warns that the wives who wait can be just as susceptible to be changed by time as the husbands whose transformation they await. It is not yet clear in what ways time will change Isha's faith in the agency of money and the achievability of her plan. For now, we see her grappling with the un-flows and mis-flows of money that make up her present domestic condition—money that remains disobedient to her will, by either flowing in the wrong direction or not flowing, all the while testing the limits of parental love and kin support in her natal home. These misaligned or absent flows of money mark out her precarious position and unbelonging in both her natal and martial home, shaping her expectations of potential flows of money and love from the violent husband. The analytic of flows (*behena* [to flow], *aana* [to come], *lena* [to take], *dena* [to give], *paana* [to receive]) evokes the multiple vectors of reciprocities and relationalities through which Isha negotiates her fractured kinworld, in a wider social context that accords recognition and respectability only to women in "good marriages."

MIS-FLOWS: Bleeding Money and Multiplying *Kharche*

Isha is the eldest daughter of Jago and Shanti, both Dhobis or washermen, who have four children—three daughters (one unmarried) and a son (unmarried). Jago's elder brother, *bade papa*, married to Shanti's elder sister, b*adee mummy*, also have three daughters (all married), and a son (recently married). Following an amicable separation, their "joint family" split a decade ago. While the two families remain closely knit emotionally, their material realities have diverged over the years. Speaking directly to this point, Isha once said, "Our papa has bled so much money [*paise bahana*], *bade-papa* [uncle] has made money [*paise banana*]." While there could be various factors at play, including the superior luck and enterprise of Jago's brother, the tale of divergence in the two family's ability to find security, mobility, and wealth in the city is often linked implicitly to the continuing "trouble" in Isha and her sister's marriage.

Isha's father sold off his share of the family land to finance the wedding celebrations of the two daughters, as well as to furnish the demanded dowry. Since then, substantial money has been spent on hefty lawyer fees for Isha's case of dowry and domestic violence, as well as to pay medical bills for Isha's

hospitalization following domestic assault and continued ill health. Additionally, there have been multiple trips to Rajasthan to negotiate with the estranged husbands, as well as to fight the case when it was escalated from the District Court to the High Court. During the same time period, Jago's brother has built a three-floor house in one of the old colonies in Gurgaon, in which they rent their extra two floors to low-end migrant workers who flock to the city to work in the growing real estate construction, motor, and garment industries, while Jago is only able to rent two rooms in his comparably smaller house. The brother's family has also become, alongside being *dhobis* (washermen), local contractors for labor and construction machinery, which they supply to small-time construction companies in the city's booming real estate sector.

Additionally, there are the multiplying household *kharche* (expenses) in Jago's house where the two daughters have returned along with their two young children. "These two kids" Isha says grabbing her daughter, "are so greedy. Get chocolate! Get toys! Get juice! Their demands are unending" The child giggles and Isha mock-slaps her bottom. "Mummy-Papa can't say no, even if it is a 150-rupees-juice these monsters want . . . they just give."[4] Even then, Isha tells me, it sometimes slips out of her mother's mouth that the *kharche* are too many now, alluding to the increased expenses of childcare, school fees, food, transport, clothes, and other daily items for a family that has doubled in size again, living in a city with growing *mehengai* (inflation) that can "suck you dry" (*choosna*).

Gurgaon has seen spectacular urbanization in the past two decades, with heavy flows of private capital transforming the city from an agrarian hinterland to India's "millennial city." While Jago's brother has been able to use family money to engage the ever-expanding capitalistic "frontiers" of the city (Cowan 2022), building small-scale land assets and labor forces to make money for the family, Isha's father's money has flown endlessly in the "non-productive" direction of care, sustenance, repair, and redress in the lives of the two daughters in an economically inflationary "sucking" context. Flow is *behena* in Hindi. In reference to money—*paise behana*—it is either linked to the way in which water flows, as an abundant and freely available substance flowing without obstacle, or, as in the context of material constraints, it is linked to bleeding, to the way in which blood flows out of the body, indexing critical loss and stress. In the sisters" case, the *behena* of money has meant the latter. This bleeding money—spent on legal fees, the cost of the wedding, and the unreturned dowry items, as well as the daily expenses of a redoubled family—has constituted a form of mis-flow

of resources within the patriarchal kin structure that has consolidated neither wealth for the patrilineal family nor the "right" kind of extended kin through the daughters' marriages. It indexes the lapsed responsibilities of the husbands appointed for the two daughters, as well as the additional expenses that their poor behavior has generated. Further, it implies the asynchronous and unbudgeted expenses borne by the father for the two daughters, long after they were married off, and in the interim period of uncertainty before they are returned to their old or new marital homes.

Within the home, money is a "gendered item" (Rogers 2005) linked to the gendered construction of power, authority, and respectability. Isha has always insisted on having a job, an easily available option in the increasingly feminizing service economy of the city. Throughout fieldwork, she was in and out of low-end service-sector data-entry or secretarial jobs, moving from job to job seeking a salary raise of a few thousand rupees. The salary, ranging between 10,000 and 13,000 rupees, must remain hidden from Heera and the courts as it will affect her maintenance claims. But within the confines of their house in Gurgaon, it is repeatedly mentioned by Isha. She routinely slips into conversation how she does not need to ask for money from her father for a new dress or accessories. One day, offering me a glass of water, Isha declared, with performed smugness: "RO [water purifier] had stopped working. For the repair I said, '*kato mere salary se*' [cut it from my salary]." Toward the end of fieldwork, Isha also convinced her sister to get a job in a beauty parlor nearby for 8,000 rupees a month, swapping the sister's unremunerated labor of housework and childcare with salaried work that generates visible income. Together they also started contributing to the legal fees of their court cases. This flow of money from the sisters' salaries goes some distance in correcting the mis-flows of the money bleeding out of their natal home. However, its corrective reach remains limited, both because of the insubstantial amount of the salaries and the patriarchal norms that discourage the father to take money directly from the daughters.

UN-FLOWS: Love, or *Pyaar*, before Money

The parents' bleeding money is a show of their love, or *pyaar*, for their daughters and grandchildren. It is a love not determined by economic rationality. In contrast to this, Isha points out, stands the lack of love in her marital home, evidenced most strongly in the lack of any material offerings—the un-flows of money.

"If the two kids would ask for toffee in our house, they would ask them to go eat shit," Isha claims. Both husbands' and the in-laws' lack of affection and attention registered in their disinterest in ever buying them new clothes, sweets, Chinese food, snacks, toys, film tickets, and the like. Any protests from the two sisters would be met with the rebuke that they had been "too spoilt" at their parent's home in Gurgaon. "None of these things costs very much," Isha clarifies; "it is not about money, it is about *dil* [heart]." Expending money on consumption activities is central to individual and collective projects of class making, signaling social success and participation in modernity, especially in consumerist urban contexts (Jaju 2023). But equally important, the buying and giving of consumer goods can constitute critical "modalities to care" for kin and become a vital way of "enacting kinship," even amid economic precarity and interpersonal violence (Han 2011, 15, 22). The lack of these material offerings registers a lack of companionate kin-making. Added to this, the two sisters were kept tied to endless domestic chores which they worked tirelessly, without respite or reward. Even for the domestic work they did, they received little material support to ease their hardship—"a washing machine they also did not want to buy." Furthermore, the family shifted the entire burden of their commercial *dhobi* work to the two sisters, who washed and ironed clothes by hand but were never allowed any part of the income. The paralegal counselors in Kowalski's (2016) study on domestic violence suggest the use *seva*, or familial labor, as a tool for re-ordering domestic relations and reciprocities. Here however, the sisters' labor and familial service met with erasure, keeping them exhausted and away from the husbands, who would go to their mother instead to eat, drink tea, chat, get their hair oiled, or watch television.

The regular eruptions of physical violence resulted—and this is Isha's repeated claim—from this misalignment of labor, money, and leisure. The family's money never flowed as kin substance for the care, protection, nourishment, or enjoyment of the wives and children, and the labor of the wives was never rewarded, materially or emotionally. Unaided by the sharing of material items or leisure time, the two couples could never develop closeness, friendship, or understanding. "They never got the chance to fall in love with us"—a strikingly structured sentence from Isha that stayed with me. "And if there is no love, there will only be *jhagda* and *maar peet* [verbal and physical fights]."

This love, absent in her marriage and marital home, is abundantly available to Isha in the city, where opportunities for romantic and sexual engagement, however furtive, abound, especially for a seemingly single woman who works

and moves alone in the city. Blushing, she would share with me romantic poetry that her much older boss had dedicated to her eyes, or how a "sweet office boy" had started dropping by and picking her up for her daily work commute and one day texted to say, "I luv u 😊." However, even as these interactions and happenings appeared tantalizing in the moment, signaling Isha's sexual and emotional desirability, she never seemed to genuinely consider them. More commonly, she enjoyed making mockery of the suggested remedy of re-marriage. Trying to be as provocative as possible, she would ask loudly in a room full of people, including family elders, "So, has anyone got a husband for me?" Often in such moments, irritated by Isha's insincerity, someone from the audience would be compelled to call out her "timepass" (cf. Jeffrey 2010). Clicking their tongues, they would rhetorically ask her why she kept joking like this when everyone knew that she wanted to "go back."

Once, in a moment of real tenderness, Isha told me, "*Didi*, I loved him. He didn't love me, but he was my *pehla pyaar* [first love]. I loved him even before his government job. He got his job after marriage. My love was not for his job. My love was pure." This idea of "pure love" came up in conversation often. The supposed purity of this love was premised on the fact that it was not tied to the socially and materially valuable government employment, that is, it was a love that hailed from *before* the money. In fact, she claimed that this was a love she had waited for throughout her adolescence, maintaining her virginal purity for her husband. In school, Isha used to be called Rani ki Jhansi, after the famous martial queen of the province of Jhansi. She earned this title because of her general no-nonsense attitude of not entertaining any boys "acting smart" by offering her flowers, poetry, chocolates, or cards. She emphasized her virtuous alignment with socially legitimate forms of love, romance, and sexuality sought through a heteronormative, endogamous marriage arranged by parents. This ideal is neither universal nor static (Davidson and Hannaford 2022). Within South Asia, women's experiences of love, desire, and abandonment have been studied as varied and complex (Karim 2022; Donner 2016; Lamb 2022, Grover 2017). Yet Isha finds it important to uphold the ideal, allowing her to express her moral outrage at having suffered domestic violence despite voluntarily and zealously committing herself to the upper-class and caste-biased socio-moral ideal of the respectable "good girl"—a shock shared by the law and performed in court proceedings that shapes socio-legal expectations of the "good victim." Bristling with rage, Isha would routinely make caustic comments, calling her husband a "dog," "animal," "villain," and "black-hearted," prodding her daughter to repeat these

epithets after her. Centering her narrative of unreciprocated love in marriage, she critiqued the violence suffered as a cruel act of neglect by a "characterless" man toward a woman of "character," bolstering her reparative claims on the husband's money and love.

As fieldwork progressed, however, the possibility of reform and reconciliation was starting to look slim given the husband's continued recalcitrant behavior. In the family chatter around Isha, increasing pressure emerged for her not be so "stuck" on Heera and willingly marry any other man that the family could arrange, even if he was inferior in employment or monetary status to Heera, which would likely be the case given the reality of the employment landscape, Isha's "reduced value" as a divorcee with a daughter, and the parents' reduced ability to furnish a second dowry. People would say she should not have so much *lalach*, or greed, for Heera's money or his government job. Here, family members were rehearsing the gendered and class-agnostic stereotype of maintenance-seeking women as after men's money—elevated to claims of "legal terrorism" by male rights activists (Basu 2016, 58)—stereotypes that ignore the structurally created dependencies between men and women linked to gender-unequal practices around property, employment, and inheritance in both the natal and martial home (Lamb 2022; Banerjee et al. 2022). Given the broader landscape of unemployment or precarious employment in a privatizing and liberalizing India, Heera's permanent government job truly constituted a unique path to material security and social respect, furnishing him with a desirable masculinity (Jeffrey 2010) and, indeed proffering a key motivation for Isha to stay in the marriage. Isha's younger brother's caste-based struggles to secure a decent job that does not involve "cleaning toilets" in the city's hospitality sector stands in sharp contrast here (see Mosse 2020). Any supposed greed for Heera's money and status is thus shaped by the context of a caste-based political economy that determines Isha's critical need for his money. Isha, however, insisted that hers was a love that predated his government job and remained unchanging in the face of the un-flows of money. It was the supposed virtuosity of such a love that gave her a moral right to his money and to the social prestige attached to being a government employee's wife.

The relationship between love and money proves a complex one, and the subject of much scholarly debate (Hardt 2011). Recent literature has questioned any simplistic dichotomies between "pure love" and "dirty money," drawing out the reciprocal fragilities, contradictory motivations, moral ambiguities, and suspicions that underwrite the tenuous yet enduring entanglements of love and

money (Cole 2009; Coe 2011; Härkönen 2019; Zelizer 2005). Through such ethnographic elaboration, the definition of love itself expands. *Pyaar*, as Namita Vijay Dharia (2022, 197) writes in her ethnography of the construction industry in northern India, "gathers a slipperiness, an intimacy, a coercive weight, a longing, and a political economy leaning." It is this multivariate and hyphenated form of love—as constituting an "affective state," "social relation," and material reality (Cornwall 2002)—that is clearly at work in Isha's case too, where romantic attachment, material pragmatism, and social image operate in conjunction. It moves us beyond the conjugal unit to emphasize the totality of social and economic relations that make up her personhood and how she participates in the moral economy around her (Hannaford 2017). The ethics of love, then, has multiple modalities (Govindrajan 2021). Yet the idea of pure love dominates Isha's narrative. I argue that it must be considered not for its actual supposed purity or impurity—the realness or fakeness of romantic feeling—but for the strategic narrative work it does of garnering a moral force with which to make a rightful claim on Heera's money, status, care, and love, given Isha's social vulnerability and economic precarity without it.

FLOWS? Realization, or *Ehsaas*, after Money

The problem, as Isha saw it, was that in the current context of the un-flows of money—that is, in the absence of sharing his income—Heera did not participate in reciprocating her love or feeling appropriate responsibility for her. This needed fixing.

"He doesn't love me? That's fine. He loves money? A person like that can be brought to his knees with money." Heera, restless for a second marriage and second dowry, had initially offered that Isha take two lakh rupees and divorce him.[5] Isha starts counting on her fingers to show how this number is not remotely sufficient. Her father spent thirty lakhs in marriage, and five lakhs in furniture, dresses, food items, and other gifts. Refusing Heera's pitiful offer, Isha had demanded 12,000 rupees per month in the session court. After six years, the courts had finally ruled on a monthly maintenance of 8,000. When Heera starts paying this monthly sum, he will also be liable to pay the total sum for the months of separation so far.

"Bleeding" money from his monthly salary in this manner will start to "pinch him" (*chubna*). Money can function as an "emotional currency" (Hannaford 2017, 5). Spending on someone other than oneself can create the conditions for "a love that is never for itself, but instead in itself constitutive both

of the personhood of the spender and the social relations that spending enables" (Cornwall 2002, 967). In such a situation, several *ehsaas*, or realizations, can emerge. Isha speculates that he will first think "practically" and aim to contain the mis-flow of bleeding money by asking her and their child to return to his home. Doing so, the transferred money will stay in his home, where he will also be able to control and limit the ways in which it is spent. Additionally, if he "pays" for his family, their honor and conduct will be linked to him, and he will be keen to keep that under his control too. The reason why these realizations have not been easily forthcoming, Isha continues in her speculative vein, is because Heera is rumored to have a girlfriend. However, once he starts paying a share of his income to Isha and their child, the rumored girlfriend will object, quarrel with him, and leave. Progressing in her imaginative flight, Isha adds, that in the time it will take for all these events to unfold, the mother-in-law would have gotten old and "taken to the cot" (*khatiya pakad legi*), finding herself in need of the care and services of a daughter-in-law. These speculations anticipate the cultural logics of the broader gender regime in South Asia where material support, romantic attachment, and care work should "naturally" draw women and men into specific social contracts that assign a "provider" and "protector" role to the man and a "dependent" and "caring" role to the woman (Philip 2022; Srivastava 2023). Patience is important, Isha explains to me as much as to herself, citing a broader crisis of masculinity. "The problem in our society is that men get married off when they are still very young." While women of the same age are already socialized to have sense and maturity with regard to "family values," men are still "boys" at the time of marriage. Their violence comes to be equated with their continued "boyishness." The possibility of seeking money from them opens the possibility for them to learn to "provide," and following their role as the provider, to learn to protect—the ultimate *ehsaas* of becoming a responsible householder man.

Toward the end of fieldwork, and six months after the court's orders, Heera had paid a mere four lakh rupees of the total owed to Isha. To avoid paying the remaining amount, he had begun spinning lies about having visited the family in person to pay the rest of the money in cash. Isha's plans and desires to employ the substance of money as a tool of kin re-ordering—through a "fusing" of love and material support (Cole 2009, 115; also see Constable 2009)—was now palpably pressing against its own impossibility. In Han's (2011) ethnography of debt-ridden Chilean homes, it is the women's borrowings of money for addicted, ill, violent, or precariously employed male kin that "generates a time for

waiting" for improved kin relations. Similarly, among waiting spouses of Korean Chinese migrants in Yanbian in June Hee Kwon's (2015) ethnography, it is the flow of remittances that maintains the elusive "promises of love," sustaining the affective labor of waiting, even as transnational marriages become increasingly vulnerable and tainted by the doubts of deception and infidelity. However, in the absence of any substantial flows of money, Isha's wait for kinship futures, rooted solely in the *anticipation* of money, is one set *against* time.

The finiteness of waiting was further necessitated by the awareness of the finiteness of parental love that materially sustained her, as well as an awareness of the changing familial dynamics around her. It had started to become clear that the parents would not continue indefinitely to offer the material support they were currently extending to Isha and her daughter, or to bring them back home once again should Isha suffer another round of violence in her marital home. In fact, this would become nearly impossible once Isha's younger brother was married. The arrival of a daughter-in-law in the house would not only add a member to an already overcrowded house but also reinscribe heteronormative norms of the family and emphasize the social shame and stigma of "keeping" returnee daughters who are to be written out of family property, home, and income. The weight of this shame was already making itself felt in the extended family. The eldest daughter of Isha's uncle had begun complaining, in whispers, about how her husband had started to put pressure on her "to behave," threatening her with the same fate as her two cousins who were "just sitting at home." An exit from the natal home was imminent, given the economic stress and social dishonor brought about by Isha's stay, and she was more desperately seeking a return to a "transformed" husband.

"*Didi*, do you know the chief minister?" Isha asked me in our last meeting, her mind racing ahead of her. "What I want is for the chief minister to announce that Heera's salary will be cut directly at the source and come straight into my bank account." Unaffected by the incredulous look on my face, she continued speaking, evoking the state in an extraordinarily personal, proximate, and direct manner. Not a cold, impersonal, and objective authority adjudicating on her case from a distance following its own legal and socio-moral diktat and pace, the state, in her speech, featured as a personal tool at her disposal, to reach the desired ends within her own schematic imagination of justice, reconciliation, repair, and moral retribution. Her "only problem," as she would sometimes put it, was that Heera refused to pay. She hoped the state, embodied in the figure of the chief minister, could use its socially sanctioned power to intervene strategically

and issue orders such that the money would begin to speedily flow toward Isha. If she can mobilize the force of the state to activate the force of money, she is on track again to await Heera's moral and behavioral transformation. Poulami Roychowdhury (2020, 111) has noted how her informants master legal vocabulary and processes through the course of their legal action and become "enmeshed" in the larger state entity. What is striking in Isha's fantastical evocation is not her enmeshment, but, rather, the state's complete subsumption within the domestic, where the state is recast as a character in Isha's personal story, the central axis of which remains her pain and her plan.

CONCLUSION

Put simply, in this essay I have longitudinally traced the behind-the-scenes of a plaintiff's demand for "maintenance money" from her abusive husband following the filing of domestic violence and dowry cases against him. This legal provision for maintenance money operates within a wider social system where it gets reworked following the logics of love, kinship, gender, and the economy. Then, a legal tool to enable separation from harm can, counterintuitively, also make apparent the reasons for and modes of return. This can only be grasped fully when we follow the money, and the deliberations around it, beyond the courtroom and other para-legal spaces. Ethnographically mapping one woman's private life in her natal home and city, away from the institutional spaces where state adjudication slowly proceeds, I have shown how the promise of legally decreed money intersects with many other types of legal and non-legal money flows: the daily costs of city living, legal expenses, the capital gains of the uncle's family, the socially exceptional steady income of the government-job-holding husband, the nonexistent income of the wife's brother, the newly acquired small income of the wife, or the wife's lack of formal share in her natal family's income. Studying the ways in which these multiple flows, un-flows, and mis-flows of money interact, I show that money is a strongly gendered substance of kinship tied to gendered roles, obligations, and relations (also see Wright 2020). It creates gendered anxiety when it mis-flows in the wrong direction. At the same time, also revealed is the gendered struggle of women—as wives and daughters—to make money flow in the "right" direction to secure kinship and belonging for themselves, in either the marital or natal home. Ultimately, money proves an important, if often overlooked, analytic to tell the story of domestic violence and the fraught management of its aftermath.

Violence fractures kinworlds, creating material vulnerability, stress, and loss, but money, as a substance of relatedness, is also seen as opening new avenues of sustaining kin relationality and encouraging kin repair and redress. This is by building an emic understanding of why violence occurs (because of the lack of realization of love given the absent or misdirected flows of money) and how it can be "solved" (through the realization of love when money flows in the "right" manner). The fluid substance of money, it is believed, can be redirected to flow in such a way that brings about positive transformations in people, social relations, and kinship structures, moving a "bad" husband and kinship toward "good." Money, in this schematic imagination, does not just passively follow or reproduce existing kinship, but works, with an agentive force, to discipline it, such as to deliver "corrected" personhood and kinship. This faith in the agency of money to link *pyaar* and its *ehsaas* within a reformed kinship endures even in the face of little evidence that any substantial change is forthcoming. This is not about misplaced faith, but about women's contextual constraints. It is about the ways in which gender-based violence is experienced as the loss of love, material support, kinship, and suitable personhood for the women, and the agentive pursuit of restorative justice through a return to an ethically and affectively reformed husband, household, and family. Money, as a kin substance, exerts its agency not just in the actual doing or making of kinship but also in the hope for kinship futures it sustains—a hope that enables an agentive waithood amid the social and economic suffering caused by domestic violence.

ABSTRACT

Isha waits in her low-income parents' home for her estranged husband, charged for dowry and domestic violence, to pay her the legally mandated maintenance money. I listen to her as she talks about pyaar*, or love, and domestic violence as arising from the absence of its* ehsaas*, or feeling/realization, by the abusive husband. The awaited money is infused with the hopeful imagination that it will generate both* pyaar *and its* ehsaas. *I argue that money becomes a substance of kinship assigned an agentive role in engendering the ethical transformation of a "bad" husband to create "good" kinship. Exploring the ways in which the tenuous legal promise of money sustains imaginations of reformed kinship futures, I outline how centrally money shapes the experience of domestic violence and its aftermath.* [money; love; waithood; kinship; domestic violence; agency; legal pluralism]

NOTES

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1. All names in the essay have been anonymized.
2. Domestic violence has been reported under Section 498A (1983) of the Indian Penal Code, where it is punishable with imprisonment and fines. Dowry-related abuse has been reported under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), a quasi-civil. quasi-criminal law. It is common for women to tactically deploy such "legal pluralism" (Roychowdhury 2020; Basu 2015)—using the threat of criminal prosecution to more forcefully bargain for the civil remedy of maintenance.
3. The Dhobi caste is classified as "Other Backward Caste" in Haryana and "Scheduled Caste" in Rajasthan. The "Scheduled Caste" status provides members affirmative action benefits in education and employment within the state of Rajasthan. Isha's sister's husband is unemployed, and because of this, her stated plan is to "leave him," not fight for maintenance and possibly remarry.
4. Approximately, 100 rupees is $1.20 USD.
5. Approximately, 1 lakh rupees is $1,500 USD, and 1,000 rupees is $12 USD.

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