

## Shifting women

### Mobilizing intimate kinship in a Punjabi diaspora domestic narrative

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**ABSTRACT:** Based on extensive multi-site fieldwork with Punjabi immigrants in Italy, the article discusses the institute of transnational marriage and kin reunification among Indian diasporas, interlacing the drive for upward mobility, the normative frame of family migration and the affective economy in building affinity relations. A household case is considered: the lag between a mother's and her daughter's experience, an Indian pioneer migrant and a 2nd generation Italian, who differently resorted to kin networks and practices of intimacy in order to circumvent contingent burdens such as political persecution, economic uncertainty, law-enforced stuntedness. The dissonant genealogical narrative that this mother-daughter dyad share sheds light on gender and age intersections in transnational migrations, revealing how a migrant life-course is embedded in family and social upheavals that unfold across different historical challenges. The role of kinship and the alternative dependencies or opportunities it may yield are gauged against a frame of structural constraints and novel desires for making one's living in a world increasingly hostile but not impermeable to mobility.

**KEYWORDS:** PUNJABI DIASPORA; KINSHIP; MOBILITY; TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES; GENEALOGICAL NARRATIVES.

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*Introduction. A random return to the field, accounting for mobility leaps*

August 10th 2016, Milan Central Station<sup>1</sup>. Hopping on a train with my children, after a torrid summer day in Milan, a familiar voice with a distinctive South Asian accent catches me by surprise: “Kattaee naheen (No way!) What the hell are you doing here?” Panting, I take off my sunglasses: it's Praneet!

Praneet was a research participant I had met four years earlier; the elder daughter of a migrant household that had welcomed me into their homes, both in the Po Valley and in the Punjabi Plain. A second-generation<sup>2</sup> Italian (in fact a 1.5 generation, born in India and moved to Italy at age twelve), my close informant used to live with her parents and younger brother in Bergamo, northern Italy. Turned twenty, she had temporarily returned to Punjab<sup>3</sup> in order to wed a Sikh young man, as arranged by her grandfather<sup>4</sup>. In a few months, the bride had come back to Italy followed by her groom. I had not seen Praneet for almost a year in the north of Italy: with their newborn baby, the couple had moved down south. News that her brother had passed me via Facebook<sup>5</sup>, and to which I had responded with disconcert, accustomed as I was to recognize transfers that climbed the Italian peninsula

1. The Author expresses sincere gratitude to the three anonymous reviewers of *Anuac* for their careful reading and insightful comments on a previous version of this piece. She also disclaims that this article takes after her own authored chapter: *Intimità in movimento: genealogie domestiche della diaspora panjabi italiana*, in *Mobilità. Incursioni etnografiche*, edited by Bruno Riccio, Milano, Mondadori, 2019: 153-177. The author received funding from the ERC HOMInG StG n°678456 while finalising this publication. The Author maintains that she held no conflicts of interest and received no funding in the pursue of the research here reported.

2. According to international classification, the children of immigrants are defined as second generation if they were born in the country of arrival of their parents. If instead they moved there as children or adolescents are known as generation 1.5 (or other approximate decimal measure). I refer to the sociological literature for pertinent discussion (Ambrosini, Caneva 2009).

3. Although Punjab, as a geographic region, stretches over present-day Pakistan, in this article I am referring to the Indian state of the Punjab. Inhabited by a Sikh majority, this breadbasket of India has always been a land of emigration, to flee from political-religious persecution and/or to attempt luck (Axel 2001; Malhotra, Mir 2012; Lal, Jacobsen 2016).

4. As I will discuss later in the paper, Punjabi marriages are often semi-arranged with one's extended family's intervention, although the spouses involved usually define their plans as being “self-arranged” (Netting 2010).

5. Facebook, Skype or WhatsApp are effective means of digital communication and relational bonding despite physical distance, between social actors themselves and with the ethnographer on field, who is increasingly entangled with social media in the study of cultural intimacy (Pink *et al.* 2016).

in the opposite direction, going up north. In Calabria, Praneet's husband, Binhat, feeling lost in a country alien to him, had found a temporary job in the construction industry, thanks to the brokerage of co-ethnics<sup>6</sup>. A mobility that had begun, as we shall see, as a well-planned transnational migration, from Asia to Europe, seemed to have turned into a makeshift transfer within the Italian territory, a provisional "internal mobility" (see also: King, Skeldon 2010; Riccio 2016). That August noon, my friend and her young family were on a trip to visit her relatives during the summer holidays, in one of those northern Italian rural towns that hosted burgeoning South Asian minorities. The bemused smiles that the two of us exchanged on a rocky regional wagon, between one station and the next, were a mutual invitation to break the ice after months of detachment.

The metaphor of "mobility leaps" recalls the steps and paces of what, once conceptualized as a history of migration, with its firm points of departure and arrival and a presumed sequence, now assumed the contours of a blurred family story of mobility, whose many places, times and actors seemed fleeting. In this article, I argue that the much acclaimed "mobility turn" (Sheller, Urry 2006; Faist 2013) may yield fruitful analyses provided that ethnographic research is equipped with the right methods to collect and analyze sensible data. Family narrative work is the technique here adopted to defend this perspective.

"Mobility" has since become a paradigm in studying migration today, overcoming the gaze centered on groups and focusing instead on space and practices of un/making boundaries<sup>7</sup>. Yet, some pioneer ethnographies of the Nineties, when globalization became a refrain, had already led the way to this interpretative turn in migration studies, acknowledging that global movements impinged on but did not sweep away "local lives" (Gardner 1995). Opening to transnational research, such works brought to light the impossible ubiquity of migrant lives, their overlapping social fields and selective relational networks, the contingency of itineraries and the need for an ethnographer to follow migrant experiences in a sequence of "here and now" episodes. The mobility turn in the social sciences warned that the present is ephemeral, that almost telekinetic new means of transport and communication involve the entire planet, where being mobile is a

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6. Regardless the route of arrival in Italy, every Indian migrant is confronted with an insertion in the local ethnic community already established. Such reference networks often offer mutual support, sometimes they hide abuse and exploitation (Lum 2012; Bonfanti 2015b).

7. That is how I framed my research with Italian Punjabis, also contributing to a volume emblematically titled *Bounded Mobilities* (Bonfanti 2016).

postmodern condition to which meanings and values are assigned in context, and often overestimated (Salazar, Jayaram 2016). Mobility thus is a complex process, which holds together geographical as well as social spaces, and cannot be understood without its opposite: immobility (Adey 2006, Schewel 2019). Im/mobility invites to rethink the tension that has always existed in migrations between staying and going, between those who can leave and those who must remain (or between those who are obliged to flee and those who may choose to stay), between those who transit or resettle (or start again)<sup>8</sup>. In the case of Punjabis here tackled, a mobility lens revises people's movements and recognizes the co-production of freedom and confinement, marked by political economies (from the market to the State) and small scale networks (from community to family dynamics; Soderstrom *et al.* 2013). Chasing mobility tracks also demands to look at temporalities: routines, disruptions and courses. For ethnographers, returning to confront at different times the same interlocutors permits to seize their second thoughts on movement, to understand their random or reasoned stops and new departures. Last, keeping together times and trails of mobility allows to dilute that exceptionality of the migrant condition, breaking the disciplinary barriers of migration studies (Hui 2016), and possibly "de-migrantize" them, while being attentive to people's mobilities as relational experiences with places and networks (Dahinden 2016).

That sultry afternoon, Praneet's appearance emerged as the tip of the iceberg, reopening the long field work that I had conducted for three years with Indian immigrants in Italy and with their families of origin in Punjab (aware that some mobility becomes viable and relevant only with the immobility of others; Bonfanti 2016, 2019). While my meagre certainties evaporated, to Praneet's rants about her new fishmonger neighbors, simultaneously interpreting for me and her husband, I recovered from her story tale that life cycle events, family dynamics and migratory pathways are tightly interwoven. There is nothing clear-cut in the lives of migrants; lived experiences of mobility transgress simple binaries like free vs. forced transfer, or labor migrants vs. refugees. The tyranny of categorizations in migration research is often inadequate to render a lived diasporic experience (Brah 1996), where family intimacy cannot elude those migration policies that support or hinder its very existence (Cresswell 2010). It was in the words rendered by my informants that I could get access to their worlds in constant

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8. Bearing in mind that many peoples across the globe do not have nor aim for a sedentary lifestyle. In today's South Asia there roam countless different nomadic groups, who thrive upon seasonal internal mobilities, or try to survive in spite of centralizing pressures to settle down (Rao, Casimir 2003; Sharma 2011).

transformation, and I tried to approach, with respect and participation, their stories of mobility within a “domestic” perspective. If the word home in the Punjabi language translates with *ghar*, this is not much about the brick and mortar of a dwelling place, but concerns the cognitive, practical and emotional dimensions which a transnational family home entails (Baldassar, Merla 2014; Bonfanti 2019). For Punjabis, *ghar* identifies the relational and caring nature of home, that my informants often rendered in Italian as *famiglia* rather than *casa*. Thus, what we refer in the article as “family” (aware that the term is biased with western ethnocentrism, Grilli 2019) is in fact a compound of parental, conjugal and sibling relations which are not only enacted in the everyday (at times under one’s roof, others at long distance), but also evoke one’s *jati* or birth-group, the base for kinning within South Asian societies (Shah 1998). This double cultural reference that migrants juggle with muddles the meaning of family as considered in the present case study. Being transnational families an elusive phenomenon (between spatial dispersion and almost unending mutation, Bryceson and Vuorela 2002), their unclearness becomes fertile ground for some gender and generational reshuffling of the deck in making relatedness.

*Methodological notes. When home ethnography delivers a polyphonic transnational tale*

This paper draws from the multi-sited ethnography (Falzon 2009) that I carried out in 2012-2014 between and betwixt Lombardy and the Indian Punjab. Based on extended observation, participatory work with Italian Punjabi families and rich life narratives, the research accounts for the complex and troubled simultaneity of transnational practices and local integration among an Indian diaspora<sup>9</sup> in a southern European country. My fieldwork took the guise of a domestic ethnography, where the homes of my informants, both in India and in Italy, stood at once as a context for and an object of socio-cultural enquiry (Bonfanti 2019). Through minute analysis of

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9. Although difficult to circumscribe, and at times abused, the term *diaspora* indicates an original community well localized then dispersed in time and space. I refer to R. Cohen 2005 for an introduction to the theme, and I emphasize that the designation of diaspora applies for various reasons to the transnational Indian migrations I deal with. First, Punjabis have historically been the most mobile groups in the period of British domination in India (hired as military staff or transferred worldwide as bonded labourers in the service of the Raj). Secondly, several waves of religious persecution against the Sikhs originating in Punjab have escalated in pogroms against this local minority, peaking in 1984 (Axel 2001). Finally, in recent post-colonial times, almost all Indian expat groups have begun to define themselves in these terms, advancing political claims, with an emergent collective conscience (Lal, Jacobsen 2016).

material culture and domestic practices, I theorized a diasporic construction of Punjabi homes that challenges the antagonism of movement vs. stillness and renders the emotional load in making home elsewhere (Tölölyan 2005; Thapan 2012). It was within the walls of privileged households, as a lived site and a set of relations, that I grappled with the leaking permeability between private and public, moving and settling. It was conducting narrative interviews in home settings that I could collect life stories and apply genealogical<sup>10</sup> analysis, finding a “rhythm” of intimacy (Tamboukou, Ball 2003). This inter-subjective tempo does not simply follow a timeline: the domestic narratives of my friends combined temporal facts with spatial shifts, recalling past experiences of close others to give meaning to their present. Paraphrasing Appadurai (2013), if the future is a cultural fact, new generations blossom on their family’s symbolic legacy.

The biographical and autobiographical methods, on which life stories are based, allow to construct and reconstruct an order through which it may be possible to interpret the world and act upon it. In the anthropological tradition, at the end of the Nineteenth century, it was Pitt Rivers who started the genealogical method as an epistemological method for doing ethnography: the collection of data was not, and is not, in itself explanatory, rather it is the way in which certain objects, facts, or tales are collected to give them meaning (Urry 1993: 27-30). In this piece, I report how I entrusted my participants to practice genealogical work in order to make each other’s accounts mutually intelligible: it is their conscious placement within a given system of kinship to render their life and mobility designs more or less valid and doable<sup>11</sup>. Thanks to the long-term collaboration sustained with these women over four years, I will draw extensively from the life stories of Praneet and her mother Kanval, working on the gender peculiarities of their “her-stories” (i.e. their life stories as female subjects, connected through a line of descent) and on the connection that both established between their own mobility agencies and narratives.

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10. As I explain later in this section, genealogy holds a rather specific meaning in anthropology, standing for the reconstruction’s of one’s family tree: centred on an *ego* whose many branches figuratively represent his/her lines of descent and alliance. Within this article, I limit myself to consider the mother-daughter bond of my informants, and how this parental tie operated in a transnational space (Declich 2016).

11. In exposing the methodological value of life stories as an ethnographic tool, Crapanzano (1984) reminds us that every biography and autobiography from time to time *recast*, literally rewrite the script of the events that occurred, modulating them with the present moment, so to restore the narrator’s authorship. With hindsight, every narration of oneself assumes a longitudinal perspective otherwise impossible to grasp with participant observation only.

Within the Special Issue, my contribution intends to revisit a research practice that, far from being outpaced in the social sciences, is a long-standing method worth to be revisited time and again. Life stories are at once source and method of ethnographic work, data sets and genres of their own (Clemente 2013). Narrative work with household members, especially the interlacement of biographical accounts among close relatives (attentive to gender and generation dynamics) is a refined device for analyzing contemporary family mobility (Giorgio 2002). Through this avenue it is possible to recover the complexity of people's subjectivities and the normative structures which thwart or assist their migration paths.

The case here proposed focuses upon a mother-daughter dyad, an instance that has been only marginally explored, often relegated to social psychology or feminist agendas. Although the author of this piece does self-define as a feminist ethnographer (in brief, I am myself a woman who works on, with, for women, Davis, Craven 2016), the arguments put forth shun away from activist concerns. That doesn't refrain me from questioning my disposition of "speaking for others", advancing claims on "third-world" women's behalf allegedly in need of western feminist liberation (Salih 2008). I think of this piece as way of disseminating knowledge co-produced with my informants, aware of the inequalities that intersect all our lives, with no pretense to defend anything else than their right to speak for themselves, just as their family stories did.

The following considerations remain speculative, on the levels of method and analysis, as they deal first with doing narrative ethnography with migrant mothers and daughters, then with the interplay between gender and generation in researching contemporary family migrations. According to Bertaux (1997), *recits de vie* may fulfill three different functions: explorative, analytical and expressive. While the three aspects can be singled out in an ethnographer's perspective, they appear enmeshed in the way my informants were tale telling one another their respective life stories time and again, interlacing experiences, memories and projections. These methods reveal the use of memory and its role in the continuing emotional adjustments in which most transnational experience is embroiled. Domestic genealogies strike the advantage of analyzing facts and emotions within a migrant family, keeping a longitudinal gaze over people's life course and the household cycle. After all, transnationalism is a potent "motif in family stories" (Stone *et al.* 2005), and an effective vehicle for articulating social changes that arise from within the home, and possibly return home. Home is not only a place for belonging, but also a space where people constantly renegotiate what "homecoming" means (Adler 2009). The multiple homes inhabited by my participants emplace and renew, time after time, the meaning of their (im)mobility and their own subjectivities in motion.

*Reading keys. Gender and kinship in migration, “a woman for all seasons”<sup>12</sup>?*

This piece follows the broad acknowledgement that gender and kinship are two keys in the articulation of migratory movements (Cresswell, Uteng 2008). Long gone are the times when the scale of migration was reduced to statistical figures and migrants were assumed as gender-neutral (or tacitly male-biased). Over three decades of social science research have given due visibility to the feminization of disparate migrant labor flows (Pessar, Mahler 2003) and a burgeoning number of policy studies has taken into consideration the diverse family constellations of mobility patterns (Brah 1996; Palriwala, Uberoi 2008). In particular, Indian diasporas, although diverse and spanning several waves and destinations (Lal, Jacobsen 2016), have since epitomized kin-chain transnational migrations with a strong male prerogative<sup>13</sup>. Punjab in particular retains the lure of a patriarchal land, whose culture of migration re-produced if not heightened this gender inequity, and whose stereotypes critically feature in the literature on marriage migration, with young brides embodying the currency of mobility incentives (Charsley 2012; Bonfanti 2015a).

In accordance with that framework, my ethnographic analysis focuses on the “mobilization of intimate kinship”: how do gender and age on one hand, and the making of relatedness (Carsten 2004; Sahlins 2013) on the other, interplay with migration strategies? I will thus compare the active tactics that two Punjabi migrant women, mother and daughter, devised and implemented through the idiom of kinship (and their positionality in it), so as to boost their lives and mobility agency against structural constraints, fronting territorial and socio-economical limits. I intend mobilization as the

12. Although far from the ethnographic case presented, I adopt the title of the drama play of R. Bolt “A Man for All Seasons”, 1960 (which staged how Cardinal Thomas More adapted to the Anglican Schism turmoil, while remaining faithful to his ethics), in order to interrogate both the resilience of my two Indian migrant female informants, and the alleged proto-type of Punjabi women (“beautiful and independent, modern but respectful of traditions”, Palriwala, Uberoi 2008: 156).

13. Thapan 2012 uncovers the ambivalence of this moral imperative “to make a better life elsewhere”: for a young Punjabi (first-born male in particular) expatriating means satisfying the expectations of parents, but also freeing themselves from the bulky weight of the family of origin. A similar contradiction returns in the departure from the homeland of young brides, who leave a parental home to set up a new domestic unit abroad (depending from their husbands), thus leaving behind many family ties (especially feminine) and finding themselves isolated and vulnerable.



timely process that my informants undertook in order to prepare for their migration prospects. Likewise, I highlight the potential for social change that their specific gendered mobilities yield. Praneet and Kanval are the main characters of this ethnographic narrative, but they are also the leading figures in their family mobilities: as daughters, spouses and mothers. As we shall see, these women's capability for (self-) movement and for moving kin members after them is rather uncommon among Punjabi Sikhs<sup>14</sup> (especially in recent waves heading to southern Europe). Yet, this unconventional genealogy will come clear as we listen to their life stories and re-inscribe their shifts within their homes and households, communities and historical times. We will then probe whether the axiomatic female oppression of Punjabi culture might really turn around in the migration process, and how this unexpected outcome could occur through a family chain migration that traditionally remains male-laden. Last, this case study may suggest a model of mobilizing intimate kinship, seeing through the hierarchies that my women informants both restage and subvert. While the case here analyzed pertains in the tradition of "ethnic studies", focusing on a peculiar history of migration (Punjabi transnational laborers), the methodology adopted tried to overcome this disciplinary bias. While valuing the use of oral history in migration studies, the narrative case method I chose to develop enhances the genealogy of a parenting rapport, and its imprinting on personal life accounts. The intimacy of a mother-daughter relation, and the trust they bestowed upon me over the course of my research and afterward, gave us all the chance to engage in a collective exercise of reflexivity. Quoting Chamberlain and Leysderdoff (2004: 237):

If we wish in particular to reveal how migrants reflect on their lives and on the families that surround them (and often only) in the emotional and imaginative world, then we suggest one way forward is to engage with memories, with what is recalled and how these memories translate into the stories people tell about their passages through their lives.

Engaging with memory, my interlocutors' double recounting teases out ways in which gender differences impact on, or are impacted by, transnational lives.

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14. In this article, I leave in shadow the deep religious feeling of the household considered, as done by my informants themselves, but I acknowledge that the Sikh spiritual profession (with its rhetoric on gender equality, Singh 2011) criss-crossed the desires and journeys of the two women involved in such family transfers, and possibly inspired their female empowerment.

### *Recollecting itineraries. Families in motion between generational continuity and change*

As cultural studies highlighted, with reference to “cultural memory” (i.e. the practice of individual remembering within a smaller or wider collective setting, be it family or nation; Erll, Nünning 2008) memory is the foundation of history and needs to be considered in a holistic sense, not just as an individual faculty but as socially and culturally constructed and communicated. The relationship between the individual and the collective in representing the past is positioned as reciprocal, mutually interdependent and constantly negotiated (Keightley 2008:197). The mother–daughter relation between Kanval and Praneet is a strong bond of female genealogy, between generational clash and solidarity. Migration plans were central to life projects in both my informants’ words, for whom “motility”, i.e. the capability to move (Kaufman et al. 2004), equated with the possibility of (well)being, questing for a better way of life (Benson, Osbaldiston 2014). Considering a mother’s and her daughter’s life narratives allows to illuminate relations within the family (nuclear and extended) as well as within the wider transnational social space that their domestic group inhabits. It is the narrative material that this mother and daughter shared with each other in real life, and then partially revealed to me in the ethnographic encounter, that offers [me] a draft script<sup>15</sup> where to see their lives being enacted, aware of promises and constraints, deeds and affects.

#### *Kanval, the fearless*

Kanval’s migratory path contradicts the standard grid of family reunification via male spouse, widely in use among the Italian Punjabi Diaspora (Bertolani 2012). Kanval came first on her own to Italy, sponsored by her expat “brother’s cousin” (a distant relation) and leaving her husband and children at home. Two years after arriving in Italy, once gained residential and employment stability - the requirements for filing for family reunification, she filled in the papers so her close kin could expatriate and move to Bergamo. Kanval’s recollection was marked by fleeing from the Punjab as a girl and living in exile in Himachal Pradesh in order to escape anti-Sikh pogroms after 1984, when some kinsmen, held involved in

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15. Following Clemente (2013), rather than a “script”, culture is a *canovaccio*, a rough plot where characters act upon with degrees of inventiveness, almost an ideological narrative of social life.

separatist actions, were imprisoned or murdered<sup>16</sup>. What struck me most in her biography, however, was that once reunited her household in Italy, Kanval mutually agreed with her husband, Manbir, to give him back the reins of their family, handing over to him her post at the bakery where she had found steady employment. Such generous choice was not taken lightly. Kanval acknowledged the extraordinary commitment taken to obtain such a position. Being a low-skilled, lone Asian immigrant woman, she had to take Italian classes for months, a qualification in baking and even a driving license. That way, she obtained from her hosting uncle permission to use his car to reach the bakery every day before dawn in the Po Plains. While her sister-in-law still teased Kanval, calling her the *sardar* (head) of the house (a term that in Punjab connotes ironically male military authority), she explained that her migration project had always been a collective design:

I left for my children. It felt so bad being away for two years, but then the hard work was rewarded [...]. When they arrived, we all lived in with uncle, and then we could rent a place of our own. My husband took the job in the bakery, I had to take care of the children [...] now I add with a little sewing [...]. Together we sent lakhs [thousands of rupees] home and my father-in-law had the villa built on our land with the savings [Interview released in Kanval's lounge, Bergamo, on Nov. 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012].

Kanval proudly recounted their efforts to remit home with startling humbleness. This observation sounds reductive, if we consider Panjabis' "thirst for moving", like Praneet's grandfather commented back in his home village (where he hosted me in their fabulous mansion), while strolling among vacant remittance houses (Taylor 2013). The owners had moved abroad, chasing migratory dreams that consecrated them to the middle-class in the homeland (Rutten, Verstappen 2014), despite the disadvantaged life they often led as immigrants (Nieswand 2011). Over time, Kanval's family migration underwent significant changes with the 2008 economic crisis and ongoing recession in the Po Plain, while the children were coming of age. Kanval pondered sending her younger son, a turbaned and pious yet well integrated young Sikh, "farther North<sup>17</sup>" to attend university (to Britain or

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16. The unrest began after the assassination of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and the following military operation "Blue Star", which burned down the headquarters of Sikh guerrillas and unleashed a wave of collective violence against civilians.

17. In the last decade, for many immigrants in Italy from the Indian subcontinent, naturalization has opened the doors to a new "motility": secondary mobility to other countries within the Schengen area (Fortier 2012). Nordic Europe (with its promises of welfare) and Great Britain (envisioned postcolonial Eldorado, already inhabited by hundred thousands of South Asian diasporas) rank at the top of further targets for southern European Punjabis alike.

Canada where other expats and well-off kinsmen could support him) and reap a better future (rather than remaining in Italy as a marginalized denizen, possibly discriminated in the labor market; Colombo and Rebughini 2012). While Kanval was a fairly devout Sikh, and cared for her children's religious education, she had never taken the Sikh baptism herself. That rite was instead actively pursued by her offspring, who both sported a turban on their unshorn head (*dastar*). While this Sikh icon rendered the youths more susceptible to discrimination, much to their mother's concern, it was Praneet who made a point in wearing the turban. Her self-pride in being a "Kaurageous" woman (playing the British Sikh pun, for which Kaur, the name for baptized women, becomes a marker of feminine bravery, Singh 2011) competed with her mother's proverbial fearlessness. There was an ill-concealed sense of jealousy between my informants, that ran more acute through Praneet's efforts to live up to her mother's high standard (whom she ironically referred to as "my iron lady"). Yet, the span of life options for Kanval's elder daughter sounded quite different, both from her younger male sibling and from her mother's experience. It was indeed up to the young woman to self-design her life according to contingencies, but also confronting the rehearsal her mother had played and paved right before her.

*Praneet, the resourceful*

Praneet, who had never felt confident in her Indian-Italian condition and spent her free time playing *kirtan* (liturgical chants) in the local *gurdwara* (Sikh temple<sup>18</sup>), complained of being somehow "stuck" in migration (Hage 2009), in both existential and governmental terms: with little career prospects nor easy chance of becoming naturalized (according to citizenship assessment in Italy<sup>19</sup>, Colombo, Rebughini 2012). When I first met her four

18. *Gurdwara* are an indispensable public space of Sikh community life, both in India and in the Diaspora (Gallo 2012). For Praneet, the hectic and crowded Sikh temple in Cortenuova (Bergamo province) was a place of sociability, ethnicized, but actively practiced. To her, like many 2<sup>nd</sup> generation peers, the Sikh temple was a collective home where to hear hoary stories and thread new ones.

19. Unless granted by blood (*ius sanguinis*), there is no citizenship by birth (*ius soli*) operating in Italy. Immigrants wishing to apply for naturalization must have worked and resided continuously in the country for at least 10 years. Children of immigrants may be extended their parents' naturalization when minor of age, once turned eighteen they may file a request for themselves. This last, less privileged route, is the only one that Praneet could pursue (being finally accorded Italian nationality 12 years after her first arrival in the country as a young girl).

years ago, Praneet was a short-term apprentice in a textile factory<sup>20</sup>. At the time, she had entrusted her mother to slow down her father's plan of wedding her to a Sikh lad from Birmingham sponsored by her aunt. However, she then conceded:

I don't look forward to getting married soon, but if I have to choose, I'd prefer to meet someone like me, I mean, of a similar lifestyle and that my parents approve of. Maybe, if he lives in England, I could move up there [...] then I think of BabbaJi (granddad), I know he is screening guys back home [...] he raised me and wishes me to return and give him great-grandchildren! [Interview released in Praneet's bedroom, Bergamo, on Feb. 6<sup>th</sup> 2013]

Praneet lived her long-term but doomed immigration status with active disquiet and imagined her future as dim, pointing to a double or a circular migration. While she never disputed that family savings were reserved for her brother's third-level studies, she believed that motility for her meant a sound marriage for which a dowry had long been set aside (Shenk 2007). Contrary to most diasporans who surfed online "matchmaking sites" (Bonfanti 2015a), Praneet waited for her kinsmen to supply options she would then weigh up. In her mobility quest, marriage was not seen as a burden, but as a chance to circumvent migration uncertainty and visa restrictions. Precisely because of her gender (Mooney 2006), she could exert personal agency over two combined structures: the neoliberal governance of migrant human capital in Italy, and the patriarchal texture of diasporic Punjabi society. In Praneet's view, to set up her own home with the "right" partner "elsewhere" would give her an alternative to the material and social moorings she could not confront otherwise.

In fact, an arranged "return marriage" orchestrated by her grandfather and her mother herself, took Praneet back to India; in a few weeks, she wedded a young Sikh man who was enthused by his expat bride. If that re-rooting had locked Praneet's routes, I could have wondered whether it was a letdown to my friend's motility, her capability to stay or move as she pleased, giving in to her elders<sup>21</sup>. Instead, quite unexpectedly as it had come

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20. The ghettoization of some segments of the work industry today in Italy (as elsewhere) was evident in the demeaned job taken up by my informant. On one hand, the textile industry has always been supported by the manual labour of women (often young, needy, poorly qualified), on another female tailoring is a channel of employment advocated by many migrant families (perceived as "safe and suitable for a woman", cit. Praneet). Yet this low-profile occupation, precipitated by the multiple marginality that my Punjabi friend embodied, was effective towards her long-term empowerment and mobility project.

21. A western bourgeois feminist thought that I did not wish to express (fearing that my friend would have never agreed), but that did speak loud about our "positionalities", and called me to cultivate "reflexivity" (Salzman 2002).

about, that return marriage soon proved its transnational potential. Fifty days after the wedding, Praneet went back to live with her parents in Italy, resumed her post and filed the request to get Binhat, her newlywed husband, reunited. For a few months, as she kept going back and forth between Lombardy and Punjab, this practically unsettled conjugal union grew ever steadier. By the time she got pregnant, he joined her over and temporarily settled down with his in-laws<sup>22</sup>. The rapid followings, with Binhat finding a job in southern Italy through the brokerage of co-ethnics and Praneet on maternity leave, opened up new scenes for this re-novated family migration.

The provisional epilogue of my friend's "mobility swings" made me cognizant of how diaspora transfers may change, halt or restart quite abruptly. Praneet's agreeing into a marriage that involved a "transnational return migration" (and further internal mobility) displays a tortuous interlacing of kin and community networks, material (dis)possessions and normative checks. The everyday occurrences she recounted with joy or anguish over her 25 life-years sound enmeshed in mobility regimes where personal choices are socially mediated and structurally hooked (Glick-Schiller, Salazar 2013). Although Praneet was born in a relatively wealthy family (*Jatt* landowners in Punjab, who could consolidate their middle class status only thanks to migratory remittances), it is her status as an expat and her due Italian passport (read: European) which allows her to advance in the bridal market and contract a favorable marriage with a better-off groom.

While I could compare modes and hopes of Kanval's and Praneet's mobilities, albeit their time lag cannot be ignored, it is significant to discern in their experiences the dialogic relation between dominant discourses and private narratives of gender roles (Thapan 2012). Both women performed their migration trajectories aware of the social expectations linked to a certain Punjabi "gender (hetero)normativity", which insisted on active male and passive female subjects (Uberoi 2006). Yet, in the frame of transnational mobility, both came to terms with dominant views on masculinities and femininities with alternative strategies that they clearly employed in inter-spouse relations (Benhabib, Resnik 2009; Merhotra, Calasanti 2010). Because of the migratory venture, whose implementation determined gender

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22. This neo-residential settlement contrasts with the traditional habit of patrilocality among Indian families (where the bride usually moves in with her in-laws ad interim, Bonfanti 2015a). Instead, Binhat's shift seems to align with contemporary Italian matrilocality, which often sees the maternal grandparents more involved with their daughter's new household and offspring.

uncertainties that urged to be steered towards the whole family's feat, domestic power stakes were continuously bargained<sup>23</sup> between wife and husband, with a tacit consent from their seniors (Agarwal 1997), and for the sake of budding new households (Taylor 2013). The genealogical case just explored does not only confirm the role of memory and narratives in understanding gender and transnational families, but also suggests how such families use and understand their memories to construct coherent narratives of the self and kin. This methodological reflection allows a shift in perspective: from seeing imaginaries on mobility to people's own imagining on the move (Cangià, Zittoun 2020).

*Not an epilogue yet. A mother-daughter idle talk in transnational marriage*

Likewise other South Asian diasporas, among Punjabis, marriage or *ristedari* has long been used as a vehicle in order to facilitate the consolidation of transnational networks (Werbner 2002). This intimate institution yields both benefits and disadvantages for the different subjects involved, depending on the social position occupied within the family and the role there held (Bonfanti 2016). Marriage (and the consequent reunion of one's spouse) is the privileged route to start a kin migratory chain: the bridgehead opens the way to set others in motion (who depend from the first, at least initially). The *riste* between Kanval and Manbir, as well as that between Praneet and Binhat, are enacted as unique and personal performances out of a culturally sketched plot, between contingent adaptations to mobility regimes and historical revolutions, generational changes and gender inequalities.

Since Punjabi migration to Italy is essentially a family mobility (Bertolani 2012, Bonfanti 2019), an unequal regime of civic rights and stratification affects the various kin members differently (Kraler 2010). Within a gendered theory of citizenship and migration (Benhabib, Resnik 2009), mobility and social integration are staged in every household, where power relations intersect across age and gender, but also across those who move or stay put. The ability to travel or remain is intertwined with the structural constraints regulating spatial and social mobility, but also with the ambivalent desires and responsibilities of those who migrate, depending on the position each kin member occupies in the household (*parivaar*) and in the extended family

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23. With reference to the "patriarchal bargain" as posited by Kandiyoti (1988), the cases of my two interlocutors gave evidence to their female agency and resilience, playing their cards in different matches where they seemed to master the rules of the game.

(*biraderi*)<sup>24</sup>. Quoting Ahmed (2004), an “affective economy of desire”, linked to the status of one’s family (related to adequate dwelling, satisfactory life standards, enduring motility) is embedded in the dealing of transnational marriages, but also imbued with gender rules and revolts. Spatial mobility and social reproduction are entangled, with added contradictions and missteps (Kofman, Raghuram 2015). Through their motherhood bond (and mothering work) across times and locations, the narrative exchanges between Kanval and Praneet illuminate what “transnational intersectionality” is all about (Mahalingam et al. 2009). There is no “one woman for all seasons”, but there are consistent adaptations from one female generation to the next, that depend on the multiple positionalities (and vulnerabilities) each woman embodied in specific social contexts. Like Anthias (2012) elucidated, a translocational lens is vital to appreciate the floating social hierarchies that migration circulates and transforms.

Praneet’s return marriage, after accurate family concerns, was advised by Kanval herself, who tried to pass on to her daughter another chance of being a successful “mover” as she had been: in a previous time, with different means. Praneet’s mobility agency capitalized on her unsettled emotions and gendered marginality: what I deemed a patriarchal return marriage scored by her mother soon shifted to a second “home come” migration, where the young bride took the lead. Despite her precarious job and legal status (still a long-term immigrant, grown up in Italy, but her naturalization pending), Praneet sponsored her spouse’s reunion and turned around the male prerogatives in starting a migratory chain (just like her mother Kanval had done at her time, under different options and fetters). Narratives after narratives, as spouses, mothers and daughters, I could find the “rhythm” of their en-gendered mobility swings. Like Brettell (1999) accomplished, in revisiting her own mother’s life story as a timeline of women’s achievements in the Twentieth century, Praneet looked up to Kanval as a role model to earn emancipation, but she did it her own way. That their female empowerment was based on mobilizing a family, more than having a political goal or pursuing personal triumphs, did not demean the sense of attainment they felt. On the contrary, in their accounts, both women were satisfied that they had been able to steer their kin migration and thread their family stories.

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24. In the family study considered here, the domestic unit was the hub of positive emotions, compared to the interferences of the extended kinship (while other Punjabi diasporic families with whom I collaborated have sometimes revealed different “affective economies”, Bonfanti 2016, 2019).



As the train was slowly reaching its destination, Praneet smiled confidently to her baby daughter and calmed her wailing “Quiet, cheer up, *Principessa*, we’re almost home (...) *Naniji* (revered mother) is waiting for us”. Said so, she snatched a picture of us all and posted it to Kanval via WhatsApp (see footnote n.4). Whether itinerant or landlocked, the worth of female genealogy (the value in female kinship ties) seemed to give coherence to the affective economies migrant women forged. Transnational marriage may still be a gender-skewed practice to get one to move and seek to a better life elsewhere. Yet, not only do women always play active roles in this “kinning” performance (the making of kinship itself Sahlins 2013), but they may also build upon their gender-bond to lead family mobilities, from one generation to the next. Facing creative challenges to racialized citizenship (Umut, Reynolds 2019) and prospecting a third generation under one roof, my friend anticipated the chance for little Meera, her baby daughter, to gain Italian citizenship soon, as nationality rules were currently being revised and some recognition of *ius soli* might grant all newborns, irrespective of ascendancy and despite the ‘lottery of birth’ (Arora 2017), the equal right to be and to move, to choose where, with whom and how to make one’s (at) home<sup>25</sup>. As Nett (1971) stated long before the frenzy over mass migration became a major political concern, perhaps the freedom of movement, without conditions nor hierarchies, is the ultimate “civil right” for which humanity, crushed by the regime of national sovereignty and harpooned in multiple inequalities across transnational borders (Faist 2019), is not ready, yet. From many places across the world though, there are thousands of people, women and men, elders and youngsters, trying to walk their way; not the least, mothers and daughters, whose intergenerational narratives may literally craft social changes in the making.

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25. This issue applied to the times of my happenstance encounter with Praneet, when the Italian Parliament was debating the option of *ius culturae* (i.e. granting citizenship to children of immigrants born abroad, but schooled in Italy for at least five years). Regrettably, since the leading Parties shifted towards right xenophobic attitudes, such proposal has been discarded until further notice.

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*Shifting women: Mobilizing intimate kinship in a Punjabi diaspora domestic narrative*

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