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Marriages & Choices

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Marriage is an institution; a wonderful union of two people, two hearts and two families. It is a union based on love, trust, honour and a sense of responsibility. Everywhere in the world, marriage has been the norm on which a healthy and fruitful relationship between a man and a woman can flourish and develop. However, it is more than just that. Marriage is a display of the society's norms concerning the social relationships and social standing. There are many factors that contribute to the establishment of a marriage contract, and these factors are just as complex and unpredictable as human beings and human nature.

If we look into the history of marriages throughout the world, we will not be surprised to find that the male party in this contract is always the one with the upper hand. It is very interesting to note, that nowhere in the world, was the female in the contract considered as important as the male.

In Ancient Greece and Rome, a woman was the custody of her father, and then after her marriage, the custody of her husband. She did not have any identity without a direct association with a male. A woman was more like a commodity for the men to stake in wagers, fight over like they would over cattle, or even claim for their own if she were alone long enough. We have the story of Helen of Troy. She had two worlds fighting over her, and two men lusting for her, but neither was concerned with whom

she wanted to be with, or where she wanted to be. We have the example of Penelope, who was chaste and true to her husband, but when Odysseus did not return for 20 years, she had men fighting over her, each wanting to marry her, and all she could do to deter them was to spin a tapestry in the day and unthread it in the night.

We have the examples of the pre-Islamic Arabs, who divided the wives of a dead man amongst the heirs as if the women were equal to, or less than cattle. Then we have the cases of the women in Elizabethan times. They were not considered people with minds and thoughts. Rather, they were commodities, just like the women of the pre-Islamic Arab days.

Historically the roles of men and women within marriages have reflected their roles within society. Laws and customs have traditionally restricted women's opportunities, limited their legal rights, and required them to be under the protection and control of a man. For example, under the legal doctrine of *couverture*, developed in England during the Middle Ages, the law viewed the husband and wife as one person—and that person was the husband. In the 18th century, English legal scholar Sir William Blackstone summed up the laws of marriage by stating that "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated" into that of the husband. English colonists in North America brought their legal traditions with them and the common law of the United States and Canada incorporated the legal disabilities of women. As a result of *couverture*, a married woman lost many of the legal rights she may have possessed before marriage. For example, a single woman who owned property lost her rights over that property upon marriage. A bride's wealth became her husband's.

The tradition of legal patriarchy (male authority) is reflected in social practices related to weddings and marriage. For example, in many cultures the bride's father "gives" his daughter to the groom. During the wedding, the father may physically walk the bride to the groom and transfer her to the groom's arm or he may verbally state that he gives her to be married. Traditionally the woman's loss of her maiden name after marriage signified that her identity was absorbed by that of her husband. It also signified her subordination to him in many matters. For example, a wife was legally obliged to live wherever her husband chose, as well as to maintain the home and submit to her husband's sexual demands. The husband also had the right to control and physically discipline the wife. In return, the husband was obligated to financially support the family. Wives had no control over property, even if they had owned it before marriage.

In the Pakistani society of the 21st century, marriage is still the most important issue taking the consideration of people. As soon as a young girl reaches puberty, the question of her marriage is given the most importance. She is prepared for her journey to her "own" home. The preparation includes training in household matters and chores, and the preparation of her trousseau. Of matters apart from these, she is not informed, for she may never need to know. When it came to the person she was to marry, that was a matter for the elders of her family to decide. She was never asked what her personal wishes were; rather, it was taken for granted that the parents would be the best judges of who her match would be. Women lived very sheltered lives and knew nothing of the evils in the world, and thus, could not make their decisions for themselves.

At least this is how the matters stood until fifteen odd years ago. Things are changing now. Now, young women have more exposure to ideas of freedom and independence. They are becoming more independent in terms of thoughts and decisions. Which line of work she opts for is very much the young woman's own choice now. More and

more, we see young women working in banks, the courts of law, the commercial sector, the corporate sector and the mass media; apart from the professions of teaching and medicine, which were thought to be the limit of a young woman's professional reach.

This change is taking place not only in the matter of profession, but also in the matter of social interaction and relationships. Young women are now asserting their independence in the matter of their social relationships. Though this is one area in which the change is taking place more slowly and least predictably. Perhaps because the idea of a young woman choosing her life partner for herself is ludicrous and thus unthinkable.

In response to this, we have the ideas of English writer Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1791). In this book, Wollstonecraft argued that, like men, women were naturally rational but their inferior education often taught them to be silly and emotional. Education, she believed, should cultivate the natural reasoning capacity in girls. She also claimed that the best marriages were marriages of equals, in which husband and wife were friends as well as legal partners. Wollstonecraft argued that equality in marriage would only come about with equality of education; and this is exactly the argument stated by the young women today.

Now, with increasing exposure in the universities and colleges, and later in the work places, women are meeting eligible young men who are, according to them, suitable matches for them. These decisions are based on the factor of mental compatibility, which is the most important element in making a marriage work.

Thus, the changing trend states, that young men and women should be allowed to choose whom they marry of their own free will, and they should be supported in this course of action, because marriages are more successful if they are based on mental compatibility and personal liking.

However, we must remember that marriage in Pakistan is not just the union of two people in wedlock; it is an alliance between two families, rather than just between the two individuals.

When it comes to the young women who do not have anyone in mind when their families choose partners for them, the case is slightly different. In such a case, the consent of the woman should still be given due importance. However, if a woman introduces the subject of her choice of marriage partner to her family, her words should not be received with hostility, particularly if she is educated and emancipated, as many young women of the middle class are.

Not everyone is fortunate enough to receive welcoming responses from their families. Most women find themselves in very awkward situations when at times they are faced with the terrible choice of choosing between their families and their intended husbands. Situations such as these may arise because of many factors. They may be social, financial or even religious.

We will take a look at these factors separately subsequently. But before we do, it must be made clear that marriage is a matter of responsibility. When the choice of who should marry whom and when is made by the family, the primary responsibility of the marriage's success is on the heads of the family. If, however, the young woman marries the man of her choice, she is completely and absolutely responsible for the

success of her marriage.

One thing that often contributes to the worry of the girls' families is the fact that their daughters might not be mature and responsible enough to make the huge decision of marrying someone of their own choices. It is possible that what she is taking as a serious relationship might just turn out to be nothing but an infatuation. It is also possible that the feelings of the young couple may be based on only physical attraction and nothing else. However, these factors can not be decided by the parents or the young couple. These things need time to mature and develop.

In a marriage, the matters of personal likes and dislikes takes a back seat when we look at it in the context of the social set up on Pakistan. The most important thing that the parents of a young woman look at when she is about to get married is whether she will be financially secure in her future life. It's not always necessary that the person chosen by the young woman is a very good one in this respect. It is entirely possible that the young man might not have a good job, might not be educated enough to get a very good job, or, might not have a job at all. In such a situation, the parents' concern is entirely justified. But the matter to consider in this instance is, where the woman actually met the man she wants to marry. If she met him during her studies, then it is safe to assume that he was also a student, and probably either her senior or her class mate. If such is the case, then it is also safe to assume that the prospects of employment and subsequent stability in the financial aspect.

Another thing that often gets in the way of parental approval is the matter of whether the family of the intended groom is of the same social status as the woman's family. It is a possibility that the young man's family is of a lower social status than the young woman's family. In such a situation, the woman must be absolutely sure of herself and also, she must be sure of her relationship with the man she intends to marry.

Another factor that is an obstacle in the marriage contract is the matter of maturity. It is possible that the girl is mature enough to make the right decision, and handle the responsibility of the marriage, but the boy might not be mature enough. Men mature more slowly than women, and are more likely to be rash in matters of making decisions. However, this is one factor that can almost always be decided with age and social responsibility.

The consent of the young man's family is another factor to consider. It is possible that the family of young man our subject wants to marry does not approve of her, and forbids the match. In such a situation, it is very important for the young man to convince his parents and family that the decision he and his intended life partner have made is the right one. This can only be done if he is able to convince his family that his intended wife is the best for his family. However, it is quite possible that they might not be successful, and it is just as likely that the opposition of the families ends up in a choice between the family and the marriage. In such a case it is important for both the persons concerned to think about matters in the long term and get right their priorities.

Apart from the family interaction, another obstacle that comes in the marriage is of the question of whether the relationship will remain the same after the marriage or not. It is very natural that the relationship between the couple becomes closer and hence more complicated after a marriage. It is not always that the couple are able to handle this transition, particularly if they are a young couple. In this case, it becomes even more essential to have the support of the families, for they may, perhaps, be able

to counsel the couple in how to establish a better relationship. More important in this case, however, is the sense of responsibility and the maturity of both the woman and the man.

This stays true of even a marriage arranged by the families. If the newly weds don't know each other, and despite being financially viable and socially acceptable, it is possible that the couple are not able to develop a mental compatibility and a healthy relationship. If such is the case, then the success of the marriage is at stake; and the success of a marriage isn't judged by the divorce or avoidance thereof, it is judged by the health of the relationship shared by the husband and wife, because this is one of the main deciding factors in the personality development of the coming generations.

Leaving aside other considerations, it is also important to keep in mind that marriage is a legitimate relationship, which is a social norm, and a requirement. It is important to consider the fact that if a young woman and young man have developed a relationship, and want to legitimise it through marriage, it is better to support this matter, rather than to oppose it, because if it were opposed, the chances of a not-marital relationship to continue are very high. This is a very dire social issue that needs to be kept in mind.

Social constraints, however, are based not only on social values, norms and mores, but also on the matters of religious interpretation. The constraints holding women down are not only religious, but are actually based on an interpretation of religion that is indigenous to the sub-continent.

Another interesting factor that is very important to consider is the fact that arranged marriages can end up in disaster just as much as a marriage based on emotions and personal liking. In Pakistan, the conservative thinkers maintain that the decisions made by the elders, in the matters of marriage, are always the best. However, that can turn out to be wrong, considering that mostly, it is these conservative thinkers who give exposure to their children, including their daughters, in matters of education and intellectual development. After such exposure, it is inevitable that the children should question some of the established norms and make such decisions for themselves. Relationships should flow naturally from spontaneous affinities and affection between two people, rather than be forced on people.

In the case of Virginia Woolf, the matter is presented in a different light. Though she was more concerned with the matter of women and their skills and abilities, the matter of marriage can not be denied in this case. Ms. Woolf herself was a very frustrated individual till she found the support of her husband, her father being the strict Victorian disciplinarian. Ms. Woolf herself did not marry till she absolutely wanted to, and her marriage too was of her own choice, at the age of twenty-seven.

Woolf suggests that gender roles are not biological, but societal. Gender is a concept imposed on people who live in society. When society allows the freedom of gender neutrality, people will be freer as individuals to act according to their nature and personality.

So in the matter of marriage as well, if it can be acceptable for the men to choose whomever they marry, the same freedom should be given to the women, along with the same exposure and education, so that they may have the confidence and faith to make the right choice for themselves.

Understandably it's hard for the parents to let go, because they are only thinking of their daughters' happiness and well being. However, it is important for the parents to give due space and consideration to the choices, thoughts and decisions of their daughters. This way a healthy course of action can be determined and damage can be avoided.

Marriage is a difficult decision at any age, at any time, with anyone. It should be concluded carefully keeping in mind the different factors involved. It is important for the young men and women to sit down with their parents and discuss all factors openly, candidly and explicitly. Only then can anyone reach the right decision. Marriage is a beautiful communion which should be taken in the spirit of responsibility as well as happiness. The emotions can never and should never be eliminated in terms of marriage choices. The need of the day is to keep a wonderful balance in both factors of emotion and practicality. And most of all, it is important to pray to Allah for His blessings at every step, and in every aspect.

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