

“What’s Love Got to Do With It?”

The Arranged Marriage Enters the New World

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A noted family therapist, Frank Pittman, has said, “Being married should not make you feel happy. It should make you feel married.” His pithy admonition obliquely addresses the question every couple, let alone every couple therapist, wrestles with: What is the relationship of love to marriage?

In the West, marriage as an institution has slightly constricted. In 2006, married couples slipped into the minority of American households for the first time. However, we know that idealized fantasies trump demographics. Notably, in a recent survey 93% of Americans said they hope to form a “lasting and happy union with one person” (Huston & Melz, 2004). The conundrum of how the rhythms of love create the score of marriage remains as perplexing as ever (2004). In “The Degradation of Romance,” Steve Mitchell (1997) posits that in order to experience their union as secure, partners create the illusion of other-knowing, a kind of smoke-screen recognition of the other, which squelches surprise—the elixir of passion. However, Virginia Goldner (2004) has a different view: that mystery and danger are essentially a male-gendered requisite for passion that denigrates the maternal stance. Goldner suggests that in long-term relationships, the inevitable losing and finding of the other creates a passionate and secure base.

Faced with controversy and paradox within our own discipline, dare we bring these questions to bear in looking at another culture altogether? How can we not do so when most of us are working with couples and individuals from other cultures? What’s more, exploring love and marriage in Bengali culture can sharpen our psychological premises about romance and commitment. When I told a friend, not in our field, that I was writing a paper on arranged marriage, he asked, “Don’t you specialize in deranged marriage?”

Arranged marriage evokes such knee-jerk negativity in us; we are the culture which repudiates constraints on individual choice. Ironically, in our cyberspace era, we have found a way back to

matching couples on similarities of values while maintaining the hipster autonomy of computer technology. Match.com applies to questionnaire data an algorithm drawn from sociology, psychology, and neuroscience, developed by Helen Fisher who has written widely about the neural chemistry of love. E.Harmony was responsible for 90 weddings a day last year. Apparently there are legions of babies named Harmony afoot in the country. These services draw on personality and psychological characteristics, as well as familial correspondences—they pre-match rather than leave attraction to serendipity.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke are pre-selected for each other, with socioeconomic precision and astrological consultation. In the words of Sudhir Kakar (2008), a noted Indian psychoanalyst, we are implicitly witnessing the enactment of a “cultural definition of marriage as a family rather than individual affair, where harmony and shared values that come from a common background are more important than individual fascination” (p. 1). Kakar articulates “a less conscious cultural norm that perceives the parent-son and filial bonds as the foundation of the family rather than the husband-wife tie exalted in some other societies” (p. 2).

Consider how rigid our perspective is on differentiation in adulthood, how in our culture we view the ties of loyalty to parents as regressive in newly married young adults. Of course, Ashoke and Ashima are spared any externalized enactment of a loyalty conflict since an enormous geographical divide separates them from their families of origin. As elaborated by Manisha Roy in her book *Bengali Women*, we do not witness the potential sadness of Ashima as she settles into lonely residence in the paternal household, sharing her husband with his mother and other female relatives. But as *The Namesake* progresses in New York, we fail to see evidence of an internal conflict as well.

Now behind most dominant cultural narratives lie other subversive texts. A “recent survey of the anthropological literature found evidence of romantic love in *every* culture for which there were adequate data (Grunebaum, 1997). Kakar (2008) points out that what he calls the “imperiousness of erotic passion” exists in fantasy in Indian culture, a fantasy grandly represented in Bollywood films. “In a culture that is deeply hierarchical, with caste and class barriers that are not easy to cross even by

the god of love, Kama, the dream is of love unimpeded by the shackles of family obligations and duties toward the old and all the other keepers of society's traditions" (p. 3).

However, I think that tension between the collective and the individual, the old and the break-away new, can fuse and release creative energy. In *The Namesake's* arranged marriage scene, we witness a frisson of attraction between Ashoke and Ashima. Is their union erotically heated by the knowledge that though their choice is determined, their bond will be free of parental restraint, since they will be immediate exiles? When Ashima places her delicate feet in Ashoke's stylish Western shoes, does she feel the excitement of liberation from the culturally mandated residence in her husband's familial household? Or from respectful dedication to her husband's family, especially her mother-in-law? Does this particular marriage arrangement capture an integration of the rebellious and the traditional?

Most significantly, a deep, compelling love develops over time between Ashima and Ashoke. I have never forgotten a meeting my husband and I had in Vellore, India, over 10 years ago with a group of four physicians, that began with professional exchange and moved to personal reflection on marriage. Three of the four physicians described how they fell deeply in love with the wives selected for them, in language that I could only describe as romantic. Kakar notes, "The dream of finding love does not disappear in an arranged marriage... [rather] it is expected that love does not have to prefigure marriage, but can waft in gently afterwards, sometimes years later when the couple is well into adulthood."

As we work with individuals from other cultures, we struggle with the tension between cultural template and individual character and personality. This dialectic involves our recognizing the personal signature in the text of universals. Why does one arranged marriage flower and another wither? Is it Ashoke's consistent tenderness that touches the heart of Ashima and draws her closer and closer to him? Alan Roland (1991) posits that the strong mother-son tie allows Indian men to incorporate more of the maternal-feminine in their psyches. This proclivity flourishes in Ashoke's devotion to Ashima. Though likely drawn to Ashima's aesthetic refinement, her underlying resilience and strength may be the fire that stokes his passion. He is a man determined to face the challenges of life head-on. Roland

notes, "the philosophical principle of activity, energy and power (shakti) is female in India in contrast to the West...the goddesses are very powerful figures in the Hindu pantheon" (p. 598).

Is the trajectory of marriage so different in Indian and Western tradition? We know that in successful long-term marriages, romance and passion erupt and dissolve in rhythms of different lengths and intensities. The Indian tradition of embedding the couple in a network of familial relationships more readily allows for a holding space in which this rhythm can fluctuate. As in any strong long-term marriage, this union allows Ashima, in particular, to grow into herself. Thus, as a mature woman, she makes the independent decision not to accompany Ashoke on his academic posting, to live "alone" for the first time.

In several scenes in *The Namesake*, we feel the depth of connection between Ashoke and Ashima, the resonance of their shared experience and struggles, their dependency and recognition of separateness. We experience their being riveted by each other. In these moments, the categorical distinctions that are posed in our offices, i.e. "I love him but I am not in love with him," dissolve. The answer to "What's love got to do with it?" is everything.

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