



## **Evolution of Pakistani Marriages**

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### ***Abstract***

This paper researches the way in which marriage as a concept has evolved in Pakistani culture. Pakistani individuals are studied and researched within Pakistan, as well as outside in foreign countries. The customary arranged marriage situation is studied, as well as its effects on the life of both the husband and wife. We also look at the evolution and how change has brought love marriages or arranged love marriages have begun to arise within Pakistani culture. The effect of love marriages on Pakistani culture and its connection to violence has also been studied. Ultimately, Pakistani culture regarding marriage has been evolving over time and in the future, we hope to see even more change which includes an acceptance for customs and traditions that are new.

### ***Background***

As the eldest daughter of first-generation Pakistani immigrants, I was always more alert to the customs and traditions that surrounded the topic of marriage. Parents of immigrants do seem to try and preserve all the traditions they've left behind and refuse to move forward. What many children of immigrants did seem to notice was, that relatives in Pakistan were moving forward without an issue. This created a sense of resentment in us; maybe our parents should have never come here. Speaking to others around me, I realized that many of my friends felt the exact same way; our parents would tell us they came here for our betterment, but we felt stuck in the past. Over time, immigration, education, and women empowerment increased in Pakistan which impacted Pakistani culture. These aspects have opened the eyes of many families in Pakistan and rules around dating, marriage, and even divorce have evolved.

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### ***Religious Aspect***

As Pakistan is a Muslim country, the culture is intertwined with the religion of Islam. Many customs, traditions, and values have been set with both religion and culture in mind. This makes it harder to argue with the validity of customs, traditions, and values as one must be careful to not offend Islam. The problem with mixing religion with culture, is figuring out how much really belongs to religion and what is being passed off in the name of Islam. For example, many Muslim men like to point out that they are allowed to marry up to four times concurrently. What they conveniently forget is the rules surrounding these unions; needing consent from previous wives, being able to afford them all in the same financial manner, and most importantly, to do this to help widowed or divorced women who are struggling. Unfortunately, they now use this exception to justify any affairs they may have had outside of their marriage.

Taking this example into consideration, it is important to be able to distinguish between culture and religion when discussing norms, customs, and traditions relating to marriage. It is equally important for females to thoroughly understand Islam, so they can fight back on decisions that are being forced on them in the name of Islam. Although, “Many Pakistani marriages are arranged, brokered by the family elders” (Evason et al., 2016, para.11), in Islam “the right to choose a husband were understood as rights given to women by Islam” (Khurshid, 2018, p. 92). This difference is important to understand and grasp. Although dating is not encouraged or advised, it is important for whomever is getting married to fully consent to the union- without any force. Parents that force or even heavily persuade children to marry individuals, are not following in the steps of religion, but a patriarchal culture.

Immigrants that move outside of Pakistan struggle to hold on to the culture and religion that they have left behind. For this reason, they tend to be even stricter with the rules they impose on themselves and their family. It becomes more difficult to understand the difference between what is religious and what is cultural as there are less resources to reach out to. This desperation to hold on to outdated ideals creates a difficult situation for their children. Children try to mesh into the society they have now immigrated to/grown up in but also respect the Pakistani culture that they have come from. Although individuals abroad are more able to speak against cultures and traditions, they still struggle to convince their parents and/or family to embrace new ideals with them.

For example, a close friend of mine- who I grew up with- fell in love with a non-Pakistani woman who was Christian- further to that, they were expecting a child before marriage. He was determined to make her his wife and all of us (children) commended him. This man was standing by his unborn child and by the woman he was in love with. What more could you want? However, all the adults spoke about how his parents failed in his upbringing. How this child walked away from his religion and was walking away from his culture by being adamant in going through with this marriage. Ironically, these same people would be judging him for walking away from his child; they would then use religion to demonstrate how he should have supported the child and married the woman. It was convenient for the adults to twist their words to suit their preferences, it was not like every next-door neighbor could advise you on your religious rights. Children of immigrants look to their parents for religious instruction, so they are also at their mercy to accept their version of what is right and wrong. Funny enough, four years later, my friend’s mother and

father speak to the fact that compared to others, their child has the strongest marriage, is happy, and has another child on the way. Looking back on this, one thought comes to mind, “the parental duty to respect a child’s right to veto a particular proposal” (Shaw, 2006, p. 213). And this is a religious duty.

### ***History of Marriage***

To truly understand and appreciate the evolution of marriages within Pakistani culture- whether it be inside Pakistan or in foreign countries- it is important to understand how marriages were treated in the beginning. Most marriages took place within extended families to keep wealth inside the family, keep the bloodline clean, and to be able to influence the decisions of the married couple. Alison Shaw (2006) states, “A classic functional explanation for cousin marriage is that it keeps property or land in the family” (p. 214). Another reason that many have for marrying their children off to those within the family, is to strengthen the relation between family members. For them, “Marriage was seen as an institution that established or strengthened the bond between families that needed each other’s support” (Khurshid, 2018, p. 98). It is easier to visit a family member’s house to discuss any problems your son or daughter may be experiencing in marriage, than it would have been to visit the house of a stranger. Those who did marry out of family or close acquaintances were often scolded, especially when issues arose.

The idea that men or women would want to develop a relationship with their future partner or be attracted to whom they marry was never a concern. The concern was that the women (usually uneducated) has been settled into a home where a man can financially afford her and their future children. There is a duty to her family that is attached to women; in other words, women will marry as they please so that they are ultimately at ease. This also meant that many marriages happened within the same status level or caste level as each other. Family members would know where they stand and only arranged marriages for their children in those that matched their level. According to Evason et al., (2016) “Potential wives/husbands are usually chosen from within the same socioeconomic bracket. Marriages are rarely approved between people of different socioeconomic tiers” (para.12). This thought process is more prominent in arranged marriages; parents want to know that their future daughter-in-law or son-in-law will be able to live up to the expectations that they have. This also very important to parents when they have a daughter; it would be a social shock to realize you cannot afford the same clothes, social outings, or even vacations that you once used to. If the marriage is arranged and not because of love, these frustrations would lead to problems in the relationship. Decisions regarding marriage mimic business transactions to ensure that there are no losses (divorce) in the future.

### **Traditional Expectations and their Effects**

In Pakistani culture, women were raised to focus on their domestic life rather than worrying about education, career, and even their own well-being. Women were encouraged to focus on cooking, cleaning, looking pretty, and taking care and raising children. There were “cultural norms

which expected women to take responsibility for domestic life while men provided financially for the family” (Capstick, 2016, p. 482). We see this trend when we look at our mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. They were raised to understand that the only important thing that would happen to them was marriage and childbirth. In addition, they were told that once they had children there was no leaving a marriage because ‘what would happen to the children?’

Although domestic violence can take place in any marriage, women were more likely to remain in abusive relationships due to Pakistani cultural expectations. It has been said that, “Some of the risk factors of IPV [intimate partner violence] among South Asian women include gender role expectations, need to protect family honor, cultural normalization of abuse, arranged marriage system, abusive partner characteristics, and women’s fear of losing children and being on her own” (Iqbal & Fatmi, 2021, p. NP5000). Women are constantly told their husband will easily find another partner, but the women will suffer as they will be divorced, who would want to marry a woman who has already been married before? In other words, who will want to be with a woman who has already lost her virginity? Many parents also never kept their doors open for children to return to. They are told that once you are married, that is forever, and you should do everything to figure out how to make your peace with it. This meant that both men and women remained in marriages to appease family members rather than do anything for their own happiness.

This thought process followed those who immigrated out of Pakistan. Another reason to remain in a marriage was lack of education on the woman’s part. How would she survive in a foreign land without education or language? Men are also incapable of taking care of the domestic life, and so are dependent upon their wives for cooking, cleaning, laundry, and taking care of children. The result is the same, men and women remain in marriages out of obligation rather than because it makes them happy. Another issue that arises with arranged marriages between those in foreign lands and those back home is the culture shock. There was an “increasing concern [from parents] about the potentially corrupting influences of western social and sexual mores” on their children (Shaw, 2006, p. 211). To be able to deal with these concerns, parents believe that marrying their children off to individuals back home will solve their problems. Children also feel forced to remain in these marriages for they don’t want to be the reason for their parents being gossiped about. Although both parties are Pakistani, there is a difference in who they are exposed to, how they are raised, and their expectations moving forward. No matter how unhappy individuals are, arranged marriage is the “main reason why so many capable young men and women are unhappy, borderline depressed and unstable in their lives. It hinders them from showing their potential, from being their best, most productive selves. Adults are not allowed to marry the person of their choice” (Nazir, 2021, para. 8). This is the main reason that change is so important; if we truly want our children- our future- to be happy and stable adults, it is time we allow them to make their own decisions.

### *Change in Marriage*

As time has gone on, things have begun to change in Pakistani culture regarding marriage. Rather than encouraging children to abandon dreams of travelling, educating themselves, and enjoying their social life, parents are advising children to take part in everything to enjoy life before they commit themselves to marriage. Because individuals in Pakistan began “sending children to

private English-medium schools, consuming (locally) branded goods, and undertaking Westernized leisure activities.”, there was a change in the mentality of most individuals in Pakistan (Maqsood, 2021, p. 96). Children are now encouraged to get educated, travel the world, socialize with friends, and even date before they bring up the important topic of marriage in the household. Parents are now wanting their children to take part in everything that they had to abandon. They are truly putting their money where their mouth is when they say, “we want better for you than we had”. This is an exciting new direction for those immersed in Pakistani culture. I have heard many friends share their delight that their parents are supporting their decision to study, work, or even travel rather than commit themselves to marriage. This allows for children to find themselves and be ready for marriage when the time presents itself.

I reached out to a family friend in Pakistan, and she confirmed the amount of change that has taken place in the culture back home. Her older sister was married off at the ripe old age of eighteen and was told to focus on the house and her children, rather than worrying about her education and career. It is important to note that the sisters have a ten-year age gap; this allowed for ten years’ worth of change before it was time for my friend to speak to the aspect of marriage. Now my friend regularly socializes with both girl and guy friends, travels to places like Dubai and Turkey with just her girlfriends - no chaperones, and has completed an undergraduate degree and is on her way to completing a graduate degree. Her parents bring up the topic of marriage gently and just as a reminder to her to keep an eye out of any potential partners she may be interested in. This was refreshing to hear; marriage is more than an obligation and should be treated as such.

Rather than openly accepting that love marriages are on the rise in their culture (due to those who still oppose), they call it an ‘understanding’. Maqsood (2021) states that, “The local notion of understandings, used to talk about premarital relationships, offers a window on the way love introduces ‘new conditions of possibility’ ” (p. 94). You will frequently hear parents speak about how the children developed an understanding in school, college, or work and then came to the parents for direction. This is one way in which they have intertwined love marriage with arranged marriage to keep both their children and society happy. Children are also aware that it is in their best interest to maintain the image of their parent’s involvement. This allows for both parties that are involved to make peace with the decision that has taken place. Family members feel as though they can ‘save face’ in the community by playing up their part in the marriage and children are happy with being able to make their own decisions in their life partner.

Others use a new version of arranged marriage, in which they are set up by adults in the family and then get to know the individual and decide if they will marry them. From personal experience, this is how my marriage evolved. I was introduced to my husband through our families, we spoke on the phone, were permitted to travel to see each other, and then allowed the parents to hash out the details. This mix of arranged and “love” has become the new norm for Pakistani individuals. Once again, it allows both parties to be appeased, “women can self-make and build toward a future of financial security and emotional fulfillment in an environment of limited options and considerable patriarchal control” (Maqsood, 2021, p. 94). This allows for the safety net of parents vetting new individuals and provides the children with a level of control in choosing their partner.

These changes are taking place because younger individuals are changing the way in which they view marriage. It is not simply an obligation or a responsibility that needs to be completed or taken on. Young adults now prefer “creating families and homes around companionship and

understanding. It is time for parents to shed caste and creed, as this matters very less in the ultimate happiness of their children and future generations” (Nazir, 2021, para.5). Even if the adults of the past generation cannot be convinced, when this generation takes on the parental role, they will be able to make more of a difference on Pakistani culture. Eventually, religion will be respected, but culture will change to become more accepting.

### *Consequences of Love Marriages*

Some parents are happy with the fact that their children have taken the initiative to find their own life partners. They understand that their children are adults and know themselves and their families well enough to make an educated decision. Ultimately, I have heard a lot of parents say, “if the decision is theirs, they cannot blame me if God forbid something was to go wrong”. This was a new statement that has popped up in recent years. This could be a reaction to those parents who had children go through arranged marriages and were then unhappy. Ultimately, it is the right decision, children should make their own decisions and deal with their own consequences. Even though there is a rapidly growing part of Pakistani culture that not only accepts but also encourages children to find their own partners, there is still another part that does not. More and more children are pushing their parents to listen to them, but this does not mean that the parents are happy with the decisions that are being made. It is “Those same parents who promise to make compromises for their “son’s happiness” sit there and find flaws...” (Nazir, 2021, para. 9). These parents seem to have a hard time accepting the fact that their child has made their own decisions. They have an even harder time accepting that whatever they thought would happen, is not going to take place. This disappointment can be the result of parents believing that their parents made decisions for them, and now it was time for them to make decisions for their children. Just as the child is exercising their right to decide; parents are fighting for a chance to decide as well.

A common reaction or consequence of love marriages is violence. For those parents who have agreed to their child’s wishes but are not truly happy, the violence occurs within the household. You would hope that family members would be ecstatic for you and only give you well wishes into the future, however, this was not nearly the case. Many family members accept the child’s decision overtly, however, on the inside they are scheming ways to end the relationship or marriage. According to the Immigration and Refugee Board for Canada (2019), “If the husband’s family does not approve of the marriage, it could encourage the husband to be physically or psychologically abusive toward his spouse, a situation that could result in divorce or murder. Sometimes, the husband’s family physically abuses the wife” (p. 2). It is almost as though the family tries to get their revenge through violence. Other times, they are unhappy at the level of attention or care that is being paid to their child’s spouse. Sadly enough, for them the daughter-in-law was supposed to enter the household to take care of them (as they did for their in-laws) rather than enjoy her life with her husband and build her family. Ironically enough, when the parents choose the daughter-in-law or son-in-law, they expect the couple to work everything out and remain married regardless of obstacles that may arise. However, when their child chooses a partner for themselves, they encourage them to separate and go their own ways even when there are no problems between the couple. Because of the patriarchal Pakistani culture, adults assume that they know their child better and can make these decisions for them. When a child comes to them with

a decision, it becomes difficult for them to make peace with this and see them as adults in charge of their own life. Parents seem unable to understand that their child is now married, and everyone should move along; children will constantly hear statements like “if you married so-and-so this would have never happened” or “this is why I told you to marry so-and-so and not this girl”. It seems to infuriate them that the child had made an independent decision and that they were happy with it.

Other families are more expressive of the fact that they do not understand, support, or accept the decision the child has made. They will tell the couple outright that they will not marry anyone who the parents have not chosen and to learn to live with that choice. When young adults do decide to defy their parents’ wishes, some families go as far as murder. According to Lady (2012), “Pakistani newspapers routinely carry articles about couples who faced violence as a result of marrying without their families’ consent. In one recent case, The Express Tribune reported last month that a couple, Almas Khan and Shamim Akhtar, were killed in Chakwal, Punjab, over the weekend of Id al-Fitr, the holiday ending Ramadan” (para. 18). Due to the Pakistani culture, families are able to carry out such acts, pretending as if their child has dishonoured them. Both the male and female are usually murdered, as they are both considered to be defying the word of the parents, and ultimately God. Unfortunately, murder is not centralized to Pakistan, it also occurs in foreign countries. And it usually leaves the government confused as to how to deal with those who commit this heinous act. According to Salon Staff (2011), “Canada takes in 250,000 immigrants a year, more per capita than anywhere save Australia, and in recent years a number of so-called honor killings have prompted debate about absorbing immigrants into the mainstream and dealing with culture clashes between immigrant parents and their children” (para. 19). This goes to show that the Pakistani mentality needs to change and if they truly are using their religion as a ruse for their actions, they should properly understand religion. It’s disheartening to realize the harm that individuals are doing to the Islamic faith when they carry out such acts and pretend it’s because they are following God.

Women who follow through with love marriages are also shown less support than those who followed the direction of their families. Research states that they “rarely receive support from their families or people close to them. A woman in an intercaste marriage is reportedly subjected to a greater risk of violence and fears more for her life than other Pakistani women in general” (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2019, p. 2). As stated above, they believe that the child has made this decision and now she should deal with the aftereffects of it on their own. This could be another reason that children don’t fight against their parents’ wishes; it is hard to know for sure if your spouse will be good for you in the chance that your entire family abandons you. Regardless of reactions from family members, more and more children are attempting to make their voices heard. Young adults are “increasingly asserting their rights against the traditions of forced marriage and parental authority, implicitly challenging one of the most powerful institutions in Pakistani society.” (Lady, 2012, para. 4) It does not seem like children will begin to back down; if they remain focused, they should be able to change the Pakistani culture to be more open and accepting.

## ***Divorce***

Divorce is a concept that is looked down upon not only in Pakistani culture but also within the religion. For this reason, individuals are told to suffer through the hardships of marriage as that is the right thing to do. Rather than focus on the happiness of their children, parents are focussed on what the town gossip may begin to say about them. Our Prophet did say “that of all things permitted, divorce is the most hated by God” (Ali, 2003, para. 1). A lot of Pakistani individuals take this statement into consideration and do not even allow conversations regarding divorce happen in their households. Women are told to compromise, understand, and do even more rather than leave. What is ignored is the fact that, “when “mutual good treatment” is not possible, there should be an amicable parting” (Ali, 2003, para. 1). For that reason, it is easy to assume and know that the main reason divorce is avoided is due to cultural reasons rather than religious.

In the past, women were encouraged to remain in their marriages for who would support them if they left? Rather than address the issues with the men, women are told to compromise. In Khurshid’s (2018) study, she interviewed a woman who stated “She realised that returning to her parents’ home would invite ridicule and blaming from the community members and even from some members of her own family. She would not be seen as a ‘wise’ woman for leaving a man who did not have any extreme flaws” (p.103). This leads to women making peace with their reality and just understanding that this is their life now. For better or for worse, couples know that divorce would never be tolerated and so it is pointless to try and convince your family to allow it. Rather than wasting time and dwelling in the fact that they are unhappy, they find happiness in the small things and make their own special home. Many women find happiness in their children and focus on their children’s lives. The same woman in Khurshid’s (2018) study states that “Her decision to stay in the marriage made it possible for her to practice choices regarding her employment and public mobility as well as decisions regarding her” (p. 103). Women found more freedom in remaining in their marriage, rather than returning home and being confined to the rules of their parental house; “divorce is a “nightmare” for her affecting her financially, socially, and psychologically” (Qamar & Faizan, 2021, p. 352). This leads to many women remaining in marriages although they are unhappy. This is not a phenomenon that is specific to women, men are also under pressure to carry out their commitments and remain in the marriage that has been arranged for them- or even in cases of love marriages. Divorce as a concept is looked down upon, and although it may be worse for women, it is not accepted for men either.

In the modern world, the idea that divorce is taboo is changing. Couples seem to be more in tune with their emotions and understand that sometimes it is beneficial to part ways rather than hold on to something. Sheraz (2019) states that “Gone are the days when partners, especially women, could just stick with an abusive spouse because of the ‘What will people say’ syndrome” (para. 1). Women now understand their rights and know that they are able to exercise these rights in order to attain happiness. Women are also more educated in the modern world, so the worry of who will take care of them has subsided. Education has been an important factor in the change in marriage in Pakistani culture. Not only are women more educated and aware of their rights and even their choices, they also know they have the right to walk away if they deem necessary. It is important to note that many individuals like to blame the rising divorce rates on love marriages when the reality could be the fact that individuals are more aware of their rights (Shiraz, 2019,



para. 2). Ultimately, individuals are placing the happiness of themselves above the happiness of their parents. Although this may seem like a cruel thing to think, the reality is that it's important for children to think of their own futures. Parents have already made their peace with their decisions, and it is now time for children to make their own decisions.

### ***Conclusion***

In the Pakistani culture, marriage is a family affair. Parents and other adult family members are used to being involved in the decision of who their children should marry. They even intervene in situations where a couple no longer wishes to remain married. As time moves forward, the western influence, education, and female empowerment has allowed for change to take place within the Pakistani culture. Regardless of the change in mindset, at times individuals are still met with criticism should they come forward with an individual they want to marry. It is important to understand that irrespective of where Pakistani individuals live, crimes against those who wish to exercise their freedom are still taking place. Governments in foreign countries are working hard to come up with ways to integrate the Pakistani culture within their own societies to reduce the likelihood of violence that takes place. We can hope that as the second generation of individuals grows, they will come with a new mindset that will help continue the evolution of Pakistani culture towards marriage.

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