

The Absence of Autonomy and Agency on Young Women amongst the South Asian and MENA Diaspora in Modern-Day Arranged Marriages

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Abstract

In the West, marriage is conceptualized as a union between two individuals based on a mutual sense of love, affection, commitment, and attraction that is driven by finding the “right” person, and usually involves a period of courtship before settling down, with or without the explicit consent of members other than the parties involved. On the other hand, the institution of arranged marriages—wherein family members or community elders select a prospective groom for a young bride, and vice versa, based on factors like caste, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, etc.—has remained intact in several developing nations, though it has declined substantially during the 19th and 20th centuries. However, Britain prevails to this day as one of the few contemporary countries in the Western world in which both the institutions of arranged and forced marriages continue to take place, particularly and almost exclusively within the South Asian and the MENA context (Ballard, 1978). Forced marriages, by definition, are characterized by the union of two parties that marry for a host of reasons—whether out of convenience, coercion, or honor—and are defined by either one or both parties’ lack of will and informed consent (Gangoli et al., 2011). While the broader practice remains prevalent to this day in several developing nations in Southeast Asia and parts of the Middle East, it has since declined substantially during the 19th and 20th centuries (Gupta, 1976).

Keywords

Young Women, Arranged Marriages, Britain, South Asian Community, MENA Community, Autonomy, Agency, Female Sexuality

1. Introduction

The practice of arranged marriages began as a means to unite and maintain the permanence and exclusivity of upper caste families. In cases of British Muslims, Islam is often used to justify the practice and coerce young women—and in many cases, minors and occasionally adolescents—into marriages against their wishes (Deveaux, 2006). In some cases, a family may want to control early on the onset of unwanted sexuality, thwarting potential relationships down the line based on caste, ethnicity, or religion. All in all, the vast majority of women in Britain even forced marriages are tied to their sense of filial obligation and acquiescence to long-standing tradition, rather than on the basis of love and intimacy that ultimately prevail as the impetus behind marriage (Chantler et al., 2009). Honor killings or honor-based abuse are just one of the many by-products of such a union, and often may be the sole agent that characterizes the very consequences of rejection or refusal to be beholden to marital customs tied to a woman's sense of filial obligation and acquiescence to long-standing tradition.

2. Literature Review

According to the modern worldview, Tahir maintains that autonomous marriage, fostered by individual agency, as understood in the West, lays the underlying groundwork and foundation for all other forms of marriage. He describes the binary as such that current autonomous marriage systems are destined to prevail and “trump” over all other existing forms of matrimony, whilst any union not forged on account of anything but love is deemed as “inferior” and should be shunned from the public eye as a legitimate status of marriage. However, Tahir asserts that this simplistic view of conjugal relations erases the need for complexity, nuance, and further insight into the various, pluralistic interpretations of arranged marriage and the varying degrees to which they can exist simultaneously (i.e., traditional, semi-arranged or love-arranged marriages). In his research, Tahir presents the ideological gap between arranged marriages versus forced marriages, demonstrating that consent must be an informed decision solely made by the individual's choice to consummate the union, while still recognizing that reporting even the slightest feeling of duress can destabilize an arranged marriage into a forced one—hence describing “the presence of consent” and the “absence of coercion” acting in tandem to serve as determining factors in defining arranged marriages (Tahir, 2021). Furthermore, Tahir comments on the characterization of arranged marriages as being an integral part of collectivist cultures where the greater involvement of the extended family and wider community in regard to marital relations takes precedence over the individual, as opposed to Western perceptions of consent in which the individual is a self-governing body that is capable of making independent decisions without the necessary approval of a group (Tahir, 2021).

According to Werner, honor and shame are rooted in collectivist societies in

which behavior of young women is strictly controlled—particularly regarding her sexuality—through means of subjugation and discipline necessary in order for women to bear the burden and legacy of upholding the family’s name and prestige (Werner, 2007). More generally defined as the need to guard female sexuality, Werner explains that tactics of honor and shame often appear in extreme forms in some Muslim societies, some of which include expecting women to veil before a wide range of strangers, especially men (Pande, 2016). Though veiling is not particularly strictly enforced, women who commit acts of adultery or engage in premarital sex are at great risk of being killed by a relatively wide range of close male kin with impunity; this code of honor similarly applies to Punjab communities as well includes Sikhs and Hindus legacy of upholding the family’s name and prestige (Werner, 2007).

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Werner critically points out that this is not merely a question of the role of patriarchy in this environment, but of power relations spanning across generations (Werner, 2007). Similarly in accordance, the British-Punjab experience, violence against women can take many different forms and often is related to intra-familial relations involving extended family members, parents-in-law, sisters-in-law, and other kin. Yet, at the very core, it seems evident that the reputation and loss of face, as well as fear of violence from family members who feel their “honor” has been attacked, are important factors for the parental migrant generation when considering marriage options for their sons and daughters of the younger generation, whose parents arrived in Britain in the late 1970s and

are reaching marriageable age in large numbers (Carroll, 2000). This, in turn, has intensified the argument about the pros and cons of arranged marriage both within and beyond the community.

“Honor” and “shame” can and often are weaponized as rhetorical devices for eliciting obedience from recalcitrant or rebellious children who refuse to marry according to parental choices (Mody, 2014). Werner affirms that as children become less willing to accept their parents’ judgment, conflicts within the families arise and multiply rapidly, often leading to worst case scenarios of forced and entirely incompatible marriages occurring across a wide range of communities, not only among Muslims, a trigger for high levels of sustained physical and mental abuse even after young women have left the household, prompting the onset of self-harm or even suicide as forms of escape from a reality made unbearable. Outside of the British public, arranged marriages are seen as acceptable, though there is broad consensus amongst young people today about whether they should not be forced into marriages against their will (Enright, 2009).

Criminologist Aisha Gill argues that cultural precepts are the foundation for constructing gender roles which dictate precedence and control for men and accord *izzat* based on the ability to control and protect women. Women are expected to adopt a correspondingly passive role: a woman’s agency is shunned in protecting family honor, so that saving face for her male relatives may become more important than personal safety (Gill). As a result, Gill argues that some women develop an ambivalent and almost resigned attitude toward violence. *Izzat* is not just a matter of importance only to older generations; it plays a key role in the lives of young people as well. *Izzat* is considered especially important in matters surrounding matrimony as the conjugal union is widely perceived in South Asian Muslim communities as a means of cementing business and personal relationships among the extended family so that withdrawal from an agreement to marry is perceived as damaging a family’s social prestige.

Ternikar examines the conjugal relations of South Asian women and their participation and role in the traditional marriage model and their relationship with dowry and how much it was considered a factor going into their marriage, if at all. Research carried out in the UK shows that the traditional criteria for spousal selection and type of kinship structure that is espoused by a bride is most akin to that of trends in North India, with endogamous marriage (same caste relations) taking precedence (Pande, 2014). Additionally, despite the number of South Asians who excel academically and continue pursuing full-time education after high school (unlike villagers in North India who do not have the opportunities to do so), they often choose to stay within the community and accept the inevitable with little to no qualms. However, it is also noted by the author that the pressure to conform and be accepted by the wider community and one’s own parents was described as “immense”, playing into the concept of *izzat*, or honor, though only women had the power to alter, destroy or enhance their family’s name (Ternikar, 2008).

3. Conclusion of Literature Review

The purpose of this review was to examine the various ways in which the notion of “honor” is embedded in culture and manifests in the day-to-day lives of young South Asian women in Britain. It is clear from the literature review that young women in recent years are still expected to bear the burden of upholding her family’s reputation, name and legacy; her acquiescence to chastity and conformity are the two most often mediums to do so. This feminine honor code dictates the way women conduct themselves as it relates to sexual purity, modesty, decorum in dress and discretion in social relations, particularly with those of the opposite sex, leaving effectively little to no autonomy for women to make decisions independent of her family and future partner. Women in this kinship structure tend to feel alienated and separate from their others. It is a particularly isolating task to be separate from other people. In violating this code, a woman may have sealed her own fate in the process. One trend that was denoted in the research was the number of young women who were at risk of social isolation and various means of psychological and physical mistreatment and intimidation at the hands of her family were she to reject a prospective marital groom. In this way, young women are shackled to the fetters of duty and honor enforced by the honor system in the repression of their own sexuality and sacrificing the physical and mental well-being of their person to adhere to a life-long status of subservience to their husbands. It is also clear that despite living in a Westernized society, South Asian women are expected to perform at the same level as their MENA counterparts; in other words, culture exposure to the West did not influence the perceptions of first-generation British immigrants even while raising in Westernized society. For many parents who raise victims of honor killings, the biggest fear is for their daughters to become “Westernized”—that is, autonomy and autocracy over decisions that extend as far as to a woman’s character and self-hood. Self-hood is the concept that women have autonomy over their own bodies. This field of inquiry is highly critical in order to raise awareness of victims like Shafilea Ahmed, Banaz Mahmood and Heshu Yones who often go remiss due to the various intersections of their identity being both from strict, conservative communities and being women in general. If their stories go untold, honor killings and forced marriages will remain thriving and flourishing in the very same environment they were exposed to thousands of years before so long as these women are dependent upon their families for archaic interpretations of gender, honor, and caste.

3.1. Methods

The sample study consisted of 2 young women—Banaz Mahmood and Shafilea Ahmed—ranging between the ages of 16 - 18 that were either of Pakistani or Iraqi-Kurdish heritage, respectively. Both young women grew up in the United Kingdom from the mid-1980s until their deaths in the early 2000s; one was in a forced marriage against her will, while the other had received unbidden and

non-consensual marriage proposals from suitors they were arranged to marry by their parents. In both cases, the perpetrators claimed they were innocent, only for local policemen to find inconsistencies in their testimonies and were thus subject to further examination and found guilty and were prosecuted on all criminal charges. In Both Shafilea's and Banaz's case, both were murdered through means of strangulation, though Banaz first endured two-and-a-half hours of rape and torture at the hands of her cousins before her execution.

I created an autonomy index where the individuals of each case study will be ranked according to their perceived level of autonomy in decision-making as it pertains to their romantic lives, 5 corresponding to a level of high autonomy when making decisions about romantic partners and 1 being a low level. The young women will also be ranked via a series of questions within the autonomy index. 1) To what extent were the women allowed to form meaningful and healthy relationships, romantic or otherwise, with people outside their family? 2) Was marriage premeditated by the women's parents or by their own choice? 3) If the women pursued a relationship, was it approved by said parents? What expectations of a future partner were imposed upon the subjects? What aspects were necessary for a potential suitor to have before marriage? 4) What consequences would the women face were they to reject a partner of their parents' choosing? 5) What role(s) were expected of the women once their marriage was consummated? 6) How was the marriage consummated?

3.2. Analysis

The results derived from the methods used to draw on all three case studies concluded that all three women were unable to form meaningful and healthy relationships to any permissible extent; all three were barred from connecting with someone on account of dishonoring their value by virtue of "cheapening" themselves by engaging in what are deemed as impure acts by the community. In each case, marriage was premeditated by each woman's set of parents, and without their waiver of approval, none were allowed to select a partner of their choosing nor have a matrimonial union without any set of parents' expressed consent. Once again in all three cases, any relationship pursued by any of the case subjects was rejected.

4. Case Study

4.1. Banaz Mahmood

Despite having raised concerns regarding her safety with the police, Banaz Mahmood was murdered in January 2006, and her uncle, father, and five other men would later be charged in relation to her murder. Her case shone a light on honor killings in the UK. Since Banaz's murder, her sister Payzee has worked with charities such as Karma Nirvana—an organization started by another survivor of a forced marriage—to raise the profile of honor crime in the UK and raise awareness within law enforcement and prioritization of these crimes within

the public sphere. Banaz had visited the police at least five times before her murder in 2006. She had told the police about the abuse she was suffering at the hands of her partner, that she was being followed by members of her family, and in a handwritten letter, she detailed the threats to her life and named the men who would kill her. She was largely dismissed by the police, with one officer describing Banaz as manipulative and melodramatic. This highlights the lack of understanding and awareness of honor crime within the police at the time. After the first attempt on her life by her own father, Banaz filmed a video on her phone, once again naming the men who would go on to murder her, adding to the trail of crumbs the police would follow in their search for her murderers. Banaz had left her arranged marriage and began a relationship with her close friend, Rahmat Sulemani. This was perceived to have brought shame upon her family, and on January 24, 2006, she was raped, tortured, and then murdered by ligature strangulation. After being reported missing by Rahmat, the police began to search for Banaz; shortly thereafter, her body was discovered buried six feet underground in a garden in Birmingham. It is documented that the body was so badly decomposed that DNA samples could not be retrieved (WJEC, n.d.).

Banaz's sister, Bekhal Mahmud was the first known woman in British legal history to give evidence against her family in an honor killing trial. She now lives under witness protection. The two other men involved in the murder, Mohammed Saleh Ali and Omar Hussain, escaped to Iraq to avoid trial. After being tracked down by the Metropolitan Police (MET), they became the first-ever suspects to be successfully extradited from Iraq to the UK. They were sentenced to 22 and 21 years respectively for their involvement in the murder and were also found guilty of plotting to kidnap and threatening to kill Sulemani (WJEC, n.d.).

4.2. Shafilea Ahmed

17-year-old Shafilea Ahmed suffered years of abuse from her mum and dad before they decided to end her life for bringing shame and dishonor to the family. One day in September 2003, the couple had pinned their daughter down on the sofa and stuffed a carrier bag into her mouth until she turned blue and suffocated (Middleton, 2019). Her father, Iftikhar Ahmed, put her body in the back of his car and dumped it 70 miles away from their home in Warrington. Since then, one of Shafilea's close family friends, Shanin Munir, has helped reveal the extent of the abuse she went through before her death, claiming that Shafilea's mum and dad would often call her a "whore and a prostitute" and beat her if they believed she was misbehaving, showcasing their blatant disapproval and condemnation of Western views on conduct and behavior. Shanin has also since alleged that she had "heard there were physical beatings and a lot of emotional abuse," as Shafilea's sister would tell her that "her parents would lock Shafilea in the garden" and that she "wanted to escape her home [as] for her it was hell" (Middleton, 2019). If Shafilea were to leave the home, it could result in the more dire of consequences, and unfortunately for her, it did. It is worth noting that

Shafilea was the oldest child of Farzana and Iftikhar Ahmed, who themselves had met through an arranged marriage. As she got older, she adopted a more Westernized way of living, taking an avid interest in fashion trends and wearing make-up and false nails. Her parents tried to curb her “rebellious” nature through a “holiday” trip they arranged to Pakistan, wherein they intended to marry her off to a cousin (Middleton, 2019). Shafilea refused to go and was met with her father drugging her with sleeping pills as a result. After awaking in a hospital room in Pakistan, Shafilea became so terrified for her future life that she drank bleach out of protest in a suicide attempt, ending with severe burning her throat and esophagus.

In many ways, this attempt was the only way for Shafilea to truly regain control and power over a life that was never marked as her own since its inception; instead, she was marked as a soon-to-be the future wife and child-bearer who was expected from an early age to serve as a mouthpiece of honor and shame solely for the purpose of upholding the family name and even the title with which her own family will bear in the future. Following the attempt, she was immediately rushed to the hospital and kept there for two months, while her father and siblings flew back home to the UK. During a furious altercation over a short-sleeved top she wore, her parents made the final and irreversible decision to murder her in the living room of their room and make the youngest siblings watch as she was suffocated to death by strangulation. Five months later, Shafilea’s body was found in River Kent, near Sedgwick, Cumbria. Her sister, Alesha, later went to the police and recounted the events in grave detail, and in September of 2011, Iftikhar and Farzana were arrested and charged on suspicion of murder. After having witnessed extensive coverage of the case highlighted in British media, family friend Shahin made the ultimate decision to come forward as she had received letters from Shafilea’s other sister talking about the night of the murder. In 2012, Iftikhar and Farzana were found guilty and were sentenced to 25 years in prison with no parole (Middleton, 2019).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how groupthink is fostered amongst collectivist societies in Britain amongst the South Asian and MENA diaspora in deciding the most pertinent factors of groom selection for young South Asian and MENA women and to what extent those women demonstrate agency in their spousal selection and autonomy after the consummation of the union. I was specifically looking for information regarding the dissonance between the country of Britain in the Western world and unique identity it holds in relation to arranged marriages amongst people in the MENA diaspora. This paper attempts to examine in what ways those from such collectivist communities regard the meaning of arranged marriages, female sexuality, and its role in such cultures. For a women to reject the notion of arranged marriages would be for her to reject not only her community, but her very identity as marital union and ability

to find a suitable partner of merit is the only status that is attached to her that is given any importance to her; in short, her ability to serve as an extension of others is what makes her recognized as a woman, nor her character. In consummating this ultimate union, the woman can distinguish herself from the rest and mark herself as a true South Asian woman who sticks to her roots and long-standing tradition. To reject a potential suitor for an arranged marriage would deem the woman as sexually promiscuous in having the agency to choose whom to be her partner and autonomy over her own sexuality.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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