

## FIRST COMES (ARRANGED) MARRIAGE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHICAL EXPLORATION OF A MODERN PRACTICE

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article uses autoethnography and family interviews to analyze the modern cultural practice of arranged marriage from my standpoint as a first generation Indian-American. Borrowing from Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledge, Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, and W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, this article presents the idea of immigrant consciousness and precedes to contend with the sociocultural circumstances, such as transnational migration, assimilation, and racism-classism, that have prompted the evolution of a *modern* iteration of arranged marriage. The central question that informs this paper is what does arranged marriage *mean* – and how can it be defended and/or criticized – in different circumstances and from different standpoints in the transnational South Asian context?

### **INTRODUCTION**

Dating is foreign to me. Is that strange to hear? Let me qualify that statement: *American* dating is foreign to me. I am a first-generation Indian-American, Christian girl. I am the child of parents who immigrated from India to the United States and who were brought together through an arranged marriage. The practice of arranged marriage runs through most of my family history and dating is a relatively new practice to us collectively. Important to note, however, is that my family members' *individual* histories, like all histories, do not run on one generalized path. I have family members who never married, who remarried, who had forced marriages, who had "love marriages," who married young, who married non-Indian people, who divorced, and so on and so forth. I point this out because beginning this exploration I felt tempted to say that arranged marriage is all I've ever known, but that's not exactly true. If anything, thinking that unnecessarily exoticizes my experience. In actuality, I grew up learning about love from Disney movies and American romantic comedies like most of my peers. At the same time, however, my family's dating and marriage practices are very different from that of most of my peers. For example, at this point in time, eleven of my thirty-eight first cousins have had arranged marriages. In fact, my oldest sister is the first person to have had a "love marriage" in my extended family. For the uninitiated, my family's history and practice of arranged marriage may seem foreign and even oppressive. I know this from experience. I've read it off of the faces of my non-South Asian peers who seemed so sad for me when I've told them I'm not allowed to date or when I've mentioned that my parents had an arranged marriage.

### **FAMILY HISTORY AND CULTURAL CONTEXT**

But not all arranged marriages are the same. Not all arranged marriages are forced marriages, but how would I explain this to anyone? It seems that my sisters and I, and I'd venture to say many first-generation South Asian-Americans, have felt the need to debunk and demystify arranged marriage for our non-South Asian peers, not only to prove that our parents, cousins, and other family members aren't living inauthentic, repressed lives, but to prove that neither are we. To proceed any further I must define arranged marriage. However, nailing down any one definition can be difficult. As described by Marian

Aguiar, the term arranged marriage “comprises an amorphous set of practices that are constantly changing” (Aguiar 183). The South Asian tradition of arranged marriage varies widely “by region, religion, caste, class, family preference, and individual interpretations” (183). Generally, my family would define an arranged marriage as a marriage that heavily involves family, particularly parents, in setting up the couple. However, there are professional in-person services and, more recently, online services available for arranging marriages, such as the infamous Shaadi.com, marketed as the world’s number one matchmaking service. Forced marriage is a type of arranged marriage, which includes child marriage, that occurs without the consent of one or both members of the couple. One or both individuals are not involved in the marriage decision making process and are not allowed to say no. Although the two are often conflated, arranged marriage and forced marriage are not necessarily synonymous.

Famous aspects of arranged marriage that circulate around the theme of choice, such as dowry and not meeting until the wedding day, are flexible and dependent on an individual’s specific circumstances. For example, my parents met each other for only five minutes once before their wedding. Twelve days after this meeting, they were married. However, their marriage included no dowry. In fact, money played an interesting role in how my parents got together. To me and my younger family members, the idea of dowry has always been a joke, an aspect of “our culture” that we did not associate with. Until interviewing my mom, I hadn’t really seriously considered its relevance to me because I assumed dowry was a religious practice that my family did not follow, not a cultural practice. However, my mom revealed that my dad’s family chose to cover “her costs,” or her dowry, and helped pay for part of the wedding, which my mom described as a big deal at the time. This made my dad’s family seem kinder and their marriage offer seem better to my mom’s family. My mom said that in her time, the 1980s, dowry was not for everyone, but class, or “caste” as I’ve heard my parents describe it, primarily defined by wealth and education, was the deciding factor in how much choice families and their daughters had in the marriage process. My mom noted that the more money a family had, the more choice a daughter had in her marriage. For example, my mom noticed that poorer families in her community generally had forced marriages whereas middle class families did not. Factors such as age of the daughter, education of the parents, and the family’s religion influenced the amount of choice one experienced as well. My mom also mentioned that she had some female family members who never married because they were not viewed as attractive and their families were not wealthy, an example of sexism-classism functioning within the practice. My mom also credits the freedom her and her sisters experienced in the marriage process, having been able to say no to some proposals and to not have had forced marriages, to my grandfather who was less strict and more progressive for their time, although this may seem counterintuitive given the limited choice arranged marriage seems to inherently offer.

It is also important to define the term “love marriage,” which I’ve noted to be widely used by South Asians. My family generally defines love marriages as marriages where the couple is not arranged by parents or other family members, but find each other and choose to get married independently. In recent years, as more of my cousins have gotten married, the line between traditional arranged marriages and love marriages has blurred, which is where I believe *modern* arranged marriage comes into play. I am a first-generation, native-born US citizen born to parents who are naturalized US citizens who moved to the US from India in their twenties. However, the generational divide in my family does not neatly coincide with a divide in national identity. *Most* of my aunts and uncles were born in India and *most* of my first cousins were born in the US, but not all. Some of my cousins immigrated to the US as children and some as adults. Consequently, their experiences with marriage have varied. Some of my cousins are more traditional having had arranged marriages completely orchestrated by their parents, much like the marriages of my parents’ generation back in India. However, some of my cousins have had *modern* arranged marriages playing very active roles in finding their spouse alongside their parents. My cousins’ differing levels of assimilation and resistance to practices such as dating and love marriage reflect the multiplicity of their national and cultural identities, which in turn has created the variety of their individual marriage experiences.

Modern arranged marriages that I’ve witnessed, specifically the marriages of my first cousins, differ from the experiences of my older family members in multiple ways. Receiving multiple marriage proposals is still part of the marriage process. I personally have been sized up for marriage and received

some strange proposals via Facebook from Indian men, none of which was or should be taken seriously. However, most of my cousins who have had arranged marriages spent months talking to their potential spouses leading up to their weddings, unlike most of my aunts and uncles who knew each other for less than a week before getting married. Apart from a few of my cousins who met their future spouses during the wedding planning process, most of my cousins spent months talking to their spouses before their weddings were officially set. I see this process as *real* speed dating where you have a few months to get to fall in love with a person your parents have picked out for you. My cousins in these modern arranged marriages have still all had the ability to say no to any individual they were not interested in. Nonetheless, there is immense marriage pressure they experience that can be seen as somewhat coercive. Pressure to enter into heterosexual marriage is not unique to Indian people, as I am sure many of my non-Indian peers could attest to. It is a pressure that also drives the emergence of dating services such as eHarmony, match.com, and Tinder. Even for my cousins who will have love marriages, dating can often feel very goal-oriented with the finish line being a wedding. However, marriage pressure differs for my cousins as compared to non-South Asian-Americans because it is dually informed by both aspects of their cultural identity. For my cousins and I, American and Indian marriage pressures compete to create the culture we experience today, unique from our parents' experiences in India and our non-South Asian-American peers' experiences in the US. In this way, arranged marriage has not disappeared, but has transformed in light of the new, hybrid culture my generation is experiencing in the US, hence the idea of *modern* arranged marriage.

So, what creates this pressure? In interviewing my family, "our community" was constantly referenced. By "our community," my family members meant the Malayalee Pentecostal Christian community we are a part of that is spread out across the United States. Malayalee people, also known as Keralites, are an Indian ethnic group from the South Indian state of Kerala. The language that Malayalee people speak is Malayalam. Pentecostalism is a denomination of Protestant Christianity practiced by people from many different nationalities. However, these two relatively obscure ethnic and religious identities meet to form a surprisingly large community in which I've grown up and in which I've become familiarized with our very specific "marriage game," which doesn't look much like the storylines of Bollywood movies one might envision. I have gone to a Malayalee Pentecostal church my whole life. My church is part of an extended network of Malayalee Pentecostal churches all across North America and these churches have regional and national conferences, conventions, retreats, and sports tournaments, such as the annual Pentecostal Conference of North American Keralites, also known as PCNAK, which has over 5,000 people in attendance (PCNAK 2018). Although these are religious events, they are often widely viewed as "Malayalee dating grounds" with long running jokes about going to these conventions if you want to find a spouse. There is some truth behind this humor. I've heard and read many "how we met" stories from younger people in my community and among them so-called "PCNAK couples" are a common occurrence. However, these conventions are only one aspect of the complicated Malayalee Pentecostal "dating/marriage game." Dating in my community is a relatively recent adaptation to the marriage process. I grew up knowing my parents would not allow me to date, but I also knew that I would have to secretly date because, having been born in the US, I would likely have a love marriage. Now that my cousins and I are older, dating is more widely acknowledged by our parents, however, this wasn't always the case. Many of my cousins began dating in high school and college, but all relationships had to be kept secret until they reached "marriage age." Marriage age varies by sex and education. For my more traditional, conservative aunts and uncles, marriage age for girls is typically between 21 and 24. My parents wanted my sisters and I to be married by 24 although they themselves married later. Even though both of my sisters will be married at 27, my parents are still hoping that I will get married no later than 25. Males are given a much more lenient marriage timeline and it is well known among young people in my community that the more time you spend in school, the more time you are given before the real marriage pressure begins. However, marriage pressure generally intensifies with age, as it seemingly does in most cultures. Furthermore, I suggest that marriage pressure within my community is created and maintained, at least partially, by gossip and shame. For example, gossip about interracial relationships has become the hottest news as of late in my community. It is well known among people in my community that getting married to a non-Indian will result in "shame" for your family and very

possibly estrangement from your parents. Though widely acknowledged, this informal rule or norm remains largely uncontested and all of my aunts and uncles, including my parents, have made it known to my cousins and I that interracial marriage will result in estrangement. In fact, now that my oldest sister has just gotten married and my other older sister will be getting married in the next year, my parents have been increasingly discussing marriage with me. Gossip about family friends whose kids are dating and marrying non-Indian people has always worried my older family members. Although I've always known marrying a non-Indian was a no-no, because of this gossip my parents have explicitly laid out the parameters for an acceptable future husband for me. It is a short list, but it is loaded with implications: "Dian, you have to find a nice boy. A nice Malayalee Christian boy." Not only do my parents expect me to marry an Indian boy, they expect me to marry a Malayalee boy, someone who specifically shares our regional, cultural identity. Additionally, my dad has made it clear that I wouldn't be welcome at our home anymore if I married someone who wasn't Malayalee and Christian. I know that sounds harsh, but from my parents' eyes this list comes from a good place. However, I believe it comes from a place of fear. For example, the story of my great-aunt who divorced her white husband is often cited to my cousins and I as representative of all interracial marriages. The high divorce rate in the US seemingly justifies this belief as well. So, what would my aunts and uncles say if I married a white boy? The premium placed on the opinions of extended family members and elders is something I've noticed in Asian cultures generally. The pressure to maintain the marital status quo is maintained by close family, but also reinforced by our larger community. Apart from the misguided belief that interracial marriages always end badly, my older family members are also afraid of the shame they will experience in our community if their daughter doesn't marry a Christian Malayalee boy. Overall, this highlights the racism of the "marriage game" in my community. I originally felt reluctant to call this racism because this expectation is an informal standard accepted by our community, not an institutional rule. However, this systematic exclusion seems to uphold racist ideologies related to superiority and "racial purity." I know my older family members hold to these practices partially out of love, but I believe it is out of unspoken racism. Nonetheless, more young people in my community are and will be getting married to non-Indian people, so the consequences of this breaking-of-tradition at the family and community level have yet to be fully seen.

After asking all four of my immediate family members if they think people should get arranged marriages and hearing a chorus of no's, I asked them why not. My sisters explained that they felt arranged marriage wasn't for them, though they wouldn't write it off as a viable option for consenting individuals. They elaborated to say that arranged marriage wouldn't feel normal for them after being raised in the US. In discussing this, they reminded me of where I learned about what "normal" love and marriage look like: from American media. We grew up on romantic comedies, so it is hard to imagine romance looking different from the American presentation of it that we have been thoroughly familiarized with. They also said the process of arranged marriage felt too mechanical and shallow, overly fixating on things such as education, family background, and even skin color. However, I did not expect both my mom and dad to say no to this question as well. Both admitted it would have been better if they were given even slightly more time to get to know each other before their wedding, not just five minutes. My parents also brought up the idea that love marriage was "in my generation's culture" and that we didn't have the same mentality as the older generation who all had arranged marriages. My mom said that she was born with that mentality and, given the fact that she did not grow up around any form of dating, there was no need to question the practice of arranged marriage. My dad described this as a generational gap. Despite these generational differences, which seemingly should have resulted in the phasing out of arranged marriage, all four of my family members brought up how the practice was continually maintained by fear of the unknown and fear of shame within our families and community. Choosing a love marriage means that any "mistake" in *your* marriage will be used to deride *all* love marriages.

#### **IMMIGRANT CONSCIOUSNESS: MOUNTING THE DEFENSE**

As a "hyphenated subject," an Indian-American, I feel the need to defend my culture to non-Indian-Americans, particularly non-hyphenated Americans, because viewing South Asian and Middle Eastern

cultures as inherently repressed and backwards isn't widely called out for being racist today. Grewal captures this idea in her analysis of the novel *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee. A quote from the *Baltimore Sun*, an American daily newspaper, described the story of Jasmine, the titular character, as "the transformation of an Indian village girl, whose grandmother wants to marry her off at 11, into an American woman who finally thinks for herself" (Grewal 72). This quote is heavy with implication and serves as an example of one of the ways in which Orientalism is imbued in American culture. A key element of this quote is its mention of this grandmother who wants to marry the main character off. Although I believe Mukherjee is right to stand against child marriage, she upholds "problematic nationalisms" (70) because this grandmother becomes interpreted as *inherently* oppressive and sexist and implicitly becomes a cultural representation of all Indians. In interviewing my family, this misconception in which arranged marriage is equated with child marriage in Western discourse was brought up by both my mom and sisters. When the "liberal imperial subject" (68) envisions arranged marriage, they seem to envision a child bride. Something that surprised me is that each of my family members brought up how their American colleagues in school or at work thought that arranged marriage meant that Indian girls are promised from birth to men they will *have* to marry. I have also felt the need to defend against the misconception that arranged marriage is always forced marriage myself, but my family has felt the need to dispel a more heinous misconception. Though child marriage is a real aspect of some modern Indian cultures, it does not represent all arranged marriage. However, generalizing the experience of arranged marriage in this way, which aligns with Said's theory of Orientalism in which the West reconstructs the Orient, serves the West well because it allows for the justification of Western rescue of "victimized Asians" (68), which implicitly reinforces Western superiority and serves in justifying Western countries' international economic ventures and authority (Said 170). Furthermore, as Grewal states, Mukherjee shows women in Punjab, the region in India where Jasmine is from, as "completely oppressed by their parents and husbands and cultures, except for Jasmine, who felt 'American' from the very beginning" (Grewal 66) because to be free and safe is to be American and to be Punjabi, or to be Indian generally, is to be attributed with "inherent violence" (67). Critics of Mukherjee problematize her "characterization of a homogenous immigrant experience" (74) which "showed the immigrant woman as exotic Other, and valorized the American dream" (74, emphasis added). An important aspect of this critique is that it highlights how Othering allows for valorization of Western ideals and practice; it aligns with the generalized Western scheme that "*those* people have it so bad, so look how great *we* have it."

So, how can there be room for me to even consider critiquing arranged marriage when there seems to be no one else defending it? It often feels like I shouldn't engage with the potential problems of this practice, such as its racism, sexism, or classism, because I feel responsible for making sure that other Americans think Indians aren't "backwards." I have to represent Indians' good side because the bad is so overrepresented already. Instead, my nuanced critiques of arranged marriage will be used as kindling in a fire that is already burning against the practice stoked by individuals who are culturally removed from it. In this way, the layers of my critiques will be dismissed. Instead, my stance will be collapsed in with that of neoliberal non-Indians who view the practice as oppressive and irredeemable. So, although many Indian-Americans, including native-born American citizens, have had arranged marriages, arranged marriage remains the mysterious, "foreign" practice of Indians, not of Indian-Americans. Seeing arranged marriage as exclusively Indian allows for the disavowal of immigrant cultures as non-American even though American culture is supposed to represent a "melting pot" of experiences. This experience is what I refer to as "the bind of being under Western eyes." As explored by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, I am aware that I am under the gaze of "Western eyes" (Mohanty 334) partially because being a person of color in the US I have always felt this. However, I also experience a variation of "double consciousness," as proposed by W.E. B. Du Bois, seeing myself both as my immigrant community sees me and as white America sees me. This experience of double consciousness that I call immigrant consciousness is not a newly documented experience. My oldest sister presented an example of "immigrant consciousness" in her interview. Growing up, whenever arranged marriage was brought up in conversation, my sister would interject before anyone else had the chance to say anything to disclaim that her parents had an arranged marriage. She described that this allowed her to derail a potential conversation on how awful the practice is, which she felt compelled to do as the only Indian present and because she wanted to

defend my parents' marriage in the eyes of her peers. In this example, my sister knew what her non-South Asian peers would think of arranged marriage, so she felt the need to covertly defend the practice. I also find the experience of immigrant consciousness particularly interesting because although I am not an immigrant, I often find myself aligning with an immigrant experience. I catch myself saying things such as "that's what American people do," as if I am not American. I've only recently identified this experience as a *first-generation* experience. My consciousness resides between my identities as an American and as a first-generation person, even though those are not mutually exclusive. The American identity I move myself into is a whitewashed identity that has taken on "Americanized" ideals while my first-generation identity places me on the defense. I must also not downplay the influence of my Western eyes on my understanding of arranged marriage. My Western eyes posit me as a "liberal imperial subject" (Grewal 168) as well. I also conform to the neoliberal consumer culture of the US and it is easy for me to collapse the limited choice of arranged marriage into the idea of no choice at all, which I must instead actively reject. While being interviewed, my sister brought up how she is clouded by this judgement of being born in the US, so we both must actively work to identify and undo our imperialist, Western-centric mindset or "Western eyes."

### CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

While interviewing my family, a common theme I noted was "our real culture" versus "our new culture," which represents a clear distinction between Indian culture and Indian-American culture, something many non-Indians might fail to see in analyzing a practice such as arranged marriage. My family's marriage practices exist between these two cultures, adapting to the freedom, choice, and consumer culture synonymous with the US (Grewal 30), also reflected in American dating practices, by compromising some aspects of our Indian culture so that at least tradition is not completely lost. The adaptive nature of arranged marriage allows it to be perpetually maintained. Santosh Desail, a columnist for The Times of India, argues that one of the reasons that the "institution of arranged marriage [has survived] in India in this day and age" is because of its "elastic nature" which allows it to "expand its definition to accommodate the needs of modernity" (Desail). I concur with Desail and I would extend his argument: the elasticity of the custom of arranged marriage allows for its persistence in the US as well and maintains the racism-classism of the custom as discussed previously. The practice of arranged marriage seems to be adapting in response to our two cultures, which are constantly in flux and also somewhat in contention. This idea was alluded to by Grewal when she described an *India Today* article that mentioned "a concern for the consequences if [Indian children] grew up in the United States, 'especially daughters'" (117). This constant mild fear of Americanization that I have also noticed seems to be both a symptom and byproduct of being a "hyphen" culture (36). There is value seen in the kind of life and opportunities the US can provide to its citizens, yet simultaneously there is a fear of losing connection with the values of "the motherland." As Grewal describes it, there is "concern for Indian 'tradition' and culture, and by extension for controlling the sexuality of the daughters and sons growing up in the United States" (117). For example, the modern, "Western" practices of dating, particularly interracial dating, premarital sex, and divorce, are cited as failures of American marriage practices that justify the need for and persistence of arranged marriage. In this way, the East sees the West as somewhat "impure" (117), which speaks towards the racism-classism of the practice, as discussed earlier. This is an important idea to explore because, as Haraway states, "the standpoints of the subjugated are not 'innocent' positions" (Haraway 444). Although in this analysis I am somewhat antagonizing the West, aspects of Indian culture also work to maintain and uphold unequal hierarchies of power, for example, through sexism. Simultaneously, however, when the Western subject highlights the sexism of "foreign" practices, I question where their intentions lie. As identified by Lila Abu-Lughod, there is a trend in American global military operations, just as there was with British colonialism in South Asia, to use "the woman question in colonial policies where intervention into sati... child marriage, and other practices was used to justify rule" (Abu-Lughod 784). The idea of the oppressed Third world subject can be reified using the narrative of *inherently* sexist and patriarchal Eastern countries and practices, which can then be used to justify US militarization and globalization of those countries spinning these as democratizing efforts performed by the generous, liberatory West. In this way, maintaining the image of oppressive

Asian cultures can have substantial value for Western countries who can assume moral authority *and* international political authority.

### CONCLUSION

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In exploring arranged marriage, I was able to delve into my family's history and have discussions with my family I wouldn't have had otherwise. In fact, my favorite moment of this process was when I was able to interview my dad, which I hadn't originally planned, and he likened arranged marriage to Amazon or online shopping and love marriage to an in-person store. Both are legitimate ways to shop, however, with online shopping you can't *really* be certain of your purchase until you've bought it and tried it yourself. Nonetheless, an arranged marriage is one way to get married, just like using American dating services is another. In interviewing my oldest sister, she brought up that someone from another country may very well look at dating in the US and think it is strange that Americans use dating services where they "swipe right" to find a partner. Acknowledging these multiple truths allows us to step away from Orientalist and Western-centric ways of knowing the world. Simultaneously, modern arranged marriage is a practice in flux, adapting transnationally, yet it is not immune to recapitulating the sexism-classism-racism of older, more traditional iterations of arranged marriage. Moving forward, the specific biopolitics of modern Indian-American arranged marriage can be teased apart and analyses can be expanded to include other forms of cultural production of a wider variety, such as TV and film. Nonetheless, by balancing this analysis with critique and support using multiple strands of the conversation on arranged marriage, we've begun to objectively disentangle and unpack a not-so-foreign, modern practice.

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