
AN ANALYTICAL EXPLORATION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL ACCEPTANCE OF QUEER MARRIAGES ACROSS THE CULTURES

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Abstract

This paper examines the perception of queer marriages across select cultures- South Asian, the Middle East, and Western culture by analysing S.J. Sindu's *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, Mala Kumar's *The Paths of Marriage*, Shamin Sarif's *The World Unseen* and *I can't think Straight*. It contends that non- acceptance far outweighs the acceptance of same-sex marriages in select cultures. This non-acceptance of same-sex relationships is corroborated by a report published in *The Hindu* on 2nd July 2024, which says that 59 countries punish people who express their queerness. Further, the paper points out that queer marriages are often stigmatized in the eyes of society because of the misperception of such marriages being "abnormal and deviant" from the world order. The chapter analyses the sociocultural reception of queer relationships in select cultures and whether women have the agency to make their choices in marriage. It also explores how cultural and social norms shape the identities of individuals, and also that of the institution of marriage.

Keywords: perception, non-acceptance, abnormal, sociocultural reception, cultural and social norms, the institution of marriage

Introduction

This paper examines the perception of queer marriages across select cultures- South Asia, the Middle East, and Western culture by analysing S.J. Sindu's *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, Mala Kumar's *The Paths of Marriage*, Shamin Sarif's *The World Unseen* and *I can't think Straight*. It contends that non- acceptance far outweighs the

acceptance of same-sex marriages in select cultures. This non-acceptance of same-sex relationships is corroborated by a report published in *The Hindu* on 2nd July 2024, which says that 59 countries punish people who express their queerness. Further, the paper points out that queer marriages are often stigmatized in the eyes of society because of the misperception of such marriages being “abnormal and deviant” from the world order. The chapter analyses the sociocultural reception of queer relationships in select cultures and whether women have the agency to make their choices in marriage. It also explores how cultural and social norms shape the identities of individuals, and also that of the institution of marriage.

Culture As A Social Construct

Culture refers to the customs, norms, and beliefs of people in a society at a given time. It is how people live and what their practices are at a particular time in society. Culture is not something that functions independently on its own; instead, it is constructed through social interactions and influences the behaviour of individuals. Social norms like women's behaviour and feminine looks are cultural constructs that can vary from culture to culture. From the social constructionist point of view, society constructs norms that are not inherent in society. As societies change, the social constructs of families and households also evolve. For example, in many societies, there is a growing acceptance of same-sex families, single-parent families, and childfree families that illustrates the drastic shifts in the cultural perception of family.

Social constructs do not have intrinsic meaning because they are created by society. The notion that certain behaviours are meant for men and women is a social construct. Social constructionism argues that the self is formed through interactions with others and in relation to social, cultural, and political contexts. The terms race, gender, and sexual orientation are social constructs that intersect with each other in shaping an individual's self and values. While culture provides a structure of norms and values for people to function in society, they can deviate from them and challenge the prevalent social notions. Culture shapes people's social identities and is also shaped by the actions of individuals in society.

Role Of Culture In Understanding Sexual Identities

Ashish Nandy in his book *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* says that Western influences, especially colonialism, impacted people's understanding of gender. Prior to the colonialization, people's understanding was that gender and gender identities were fluid. However, after the arrival of the colonialists, people were made to believe gender was binary. Nandy says that the

presence of androgynous characters in Indian mythologies only goes to establish the fluid nature of gender roles. Similarly, Sudhish Kakar states that there was no sexual repression in ancient India from the third to twelfth centuries. "The demands of sexuality had to be reconciled with those of morality...it was reconciliation rather than repression." He gives the example of Kamasutra to show that sexuality was not repressed in times of yore and that gender roles were neither rigid nor fixed.

Thadani argues that homosexuality in India is not a recent phenomenon as widely construed to be, but has been in existence since ancient times. She says that viewing homosexuality as a Western import is nothing but erasing its existence from the public realm: "...It is claimed that in one form or another that homosexuality came from the other, be it Western, Greek or Arabic. This technique of "othering" functions as a form of exiling, rendering invisible and excommunicating anything which may be seen as representative of homosexual and homoerotic traditions." Talking about the formation of identities, Ashish Nandy points out that individuals always have splintered identities and that they do not belong to any one community. An individual has multiple identities, which have become a part of their lives.

A person, individually, belongs to not one community, but to a series of communities which are concentrically organized, from the country, to the region, to the language group, to sects, religious groups and then caste groups. It is a very complex system. A person has multiple identities, multiple allegiances. A normal Indian lives with a splintered self and is quite comfortable with it because it is a diversity they're really used to, it has been there for centuries.

The views of Ashish Nandy and Sudhish Kakar reinforce that gender is fluid, and culture plays a significant role in understanding gender.

Intersection Of Cultures And Sexual Identities

Among several factors, culture also plays a significant role in shaping the sexual identities of individuals. Cultures concerning women, always expect them to put aside their personal desires and follow the rules laid out for them by society. They face ridicule and are subjected to social condemnation if they fail to adhere to the conventions set out for them. This point is reiterated by S.J.Sindu when she says: "Marriage should not change a woman's identity or who a woman is, but "... culture—both Hindu and American—expects her to put aside her desires (both artistic and sexual) and be a Married Woman..."

Lucky in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* does not follow the norms expected of women, by having short hair, strong arms, crossing her legs, not wearing her wedding ring, and not having a child immediately after marriage. Her native South

Asian culture and her adopted American culture force her to give up her personal and sexual desire and get married much against her wishes. Similarly, even though Nisha dates Lucky, her South Asian cultural values do not allow her to pursue her relationship with Lucky.

Deepa, in *The Paths of Marriage*, is a queer woman who is unable to come out of the closet because of being an Indian. She says that as “Indians did not view their children as autonomous beings as Americans did [p.260],” she finds it difficult to tell her mother that “My love and desire for my life partner is simply for someone of the same sex [p.260].” It is the intersection of being a South Asian and a queer woman that creates discrimination. Ratti says: “What makes the South Asian gay experience in America unique is not just having to face homophobia in the South Asian subculture or racism in the largely white gay subculture, but the intersection of the two.”

Tala, a Palestinian Arab woman in *I can't think Straight*, is unable to tell her parents openly about her sexual attraction because of the fear of being ridiculed in her conservative Amman society. She says that her Middle Eastern culture is an unsparing one that will never approve of same-sex relationships. This point is echoed by Shamin Sarif in one of her interviews when she says that it is difficult for queer people in the Middle East to come out. She says though things have changed, executions continue to happen in Saudi Arabia and that it is hard for women and queer people to live in the Middle East. Thus, the rigid cultural dogmas of her Middle Eastern culture shape Tala's choice of not coming out to her family.

Due to strong allegiance to their families and a culture that prohibits discussions on sexuality at home; many South Asian queer people struggle to come out to their families. The fear of rejection by their families and in their community makes South Asian queer people to lead clandestine lives. This fear of rejection makes Deepa stay in the closet in *The Paths of Marriage*. The taboo associated with sexuality in South Asian culture and family expectations also dissuade South Asian queer people from opening up to their families. One of the respondents in the article “Now You See Her, Now You Don't: The invisible lives of queer women in India” says that it is social conditioning that makes women sacrifice their desires and fall in line with the norms laid out for them. She opines that it becomes even more difficult for queer women to disclose their sexual identities because they are torn between their personal desires on one hand and familial expectations on the other hand.

Women are conditioned to be quiet and are taught that their voice does not matter...since childhood, they are forced to put aside their desires, are made to accept things that are handed down to them, and face restrictions in their

lives, be it in their marriage or their relationships...When there are no discussions on women's sexuality at home or elsewhere, it becomes increasingly difficult to talk about the lives of queer women, who are caught between their personal choice on one hand and that of living up to the expectations of their families on the other hand.

Concerning South Asian queer women, they face the double whammy- being women and being queer and many times, they are coerced into marriage due to social pressure and the fear of backlash from society at large. A case in point is that of Nisha in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, who wants to build a life with Lucky but is scared to come out. Fearing reprisal from her family and her Sri Lankan community, she succumbs to the pressures around her and gets married to a heterosexual man. While Lucky is an example of a woman choosing her path, Nisha is a classic example of a woman bowing to social pressures. The fear of antagonism, negativity, and familial backlash forces South Asian queer women to either lead Hidden Lives Or Go In For Heterosexual Marriages.

Cultural Hybridity

Cultural hybridity is the process wherein two cultures blend due to migration or globalization. In the words of Young, the term 'hybrid' in the nineteenth century was used to refer to a physiological phenomenon. However, in the twentieth century, it is used to describe a cultural phenomenon. The term 'Cultural Hybridity' was coined by Homi K. Bhabha who says that there is no essentialist cultural identity because a new hybrid identity emerges due to the intermingling of different cultures. *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* and *The Paths of Marriage* deal with cultural hybridity, where there is an intermingling of South Asian and Western cultures. The protagonists have divided identities, i.e. they are neither Indians nor Americans completely. Talking about divided identities, Jhumpa Lahiri says that immigrants often face a conflict of identities because they move away from their native country and settle in a foreign country, which causes their cultural displacement and loss of identity. "The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so far those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously... It is a classic case of divided identity, but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less pronounced."

While some immigrants assimilate into the adopted culture, others find it daunting to fit into a new culture. As South Asian immigrants in the U.S., Lucky, Nisha, and Deepa cannot completely fit into the Western culture and hence lead dual lives. It is due to the stigma attached to same-sex relationships that Lucky is unable

to tell her sexual identity to her family. Hence, she goes for a marriage of convenience with a gay man. She leads a double life, pretending to be a heterosexual to her family while secretly pursuing her relationship with her lover. Similarly, Deepa stays as a lesbian in the closet because her mother is homophobic. She finds it challenging to live a double life because she feels she is neither true to her mother nor herself. The conflicting cultures - South Asian and Western culture - affect the immigrants' way of life, which can be seen in the case of Lucky, Nisha, or Deepa, who are unable to disclose their sexual identities to their families because they cannot give up the tag of being 'Indians.' They cannot strike a balance between their parents' expectations and their desires, which ultimately results in them leading secretive lives.

Marriage As A Construct Of Feminine And Cultural Identity

Marriage plays an integral part in women's lives. Parents strongly feel that they must get their children, especially women, married, and hence, there is always immense familial pressure on women to get married as per their parents' wishes. Similarly, parents always feel that women would realize the happiness of marriage only when they get married. Tala's mother reinforces this point in *I can't think straight* when she says: "...Tala would have discovered that marrying someone was better than a hundred other things she could decide to do with her day [p. 126] Similarly, Lucky's mother in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* wants Lucky to get married by citing the example of her elder sister: "I couldn't even guess at the boundless happiness a marriage could give. Shyama was held up as an example [p. 128]." In *I can't think straight* when Leyla discloses that she is gay, her mother is unhappy that her daughter's wedding will never come through and that her status among her friends will never be enhanced. "...The wedding would no longer take place...without it... the general elevation of status among her peers.... She could not imagine what else would be left for her ... [p.154]."

Arranged marriage is always associated with family honour and the elevation of parents' prestige in the eyes of their peers. When women refuse to get married, it causes disappointment to their parents. In *The Paths of Marriage*, Pooja is forced into an arranged marriage by her mother, much against her wishes. This coercion results in Pooja sacrificing her desires and giving up her identity as an individual. In the words of Mala Kumar: "I think every society has a concept of arranged or coerced marriages, whether it is general community pressure to marry or the actual act of forcing someone to get married." Echoing Mala Kumar's remark that some women are forced into arranged marriages, Gauthaman Ranganathan remarks: "... arranged marriages provide little or no space for conversations between the man and woman,"

and this puts a woman at a disadvantage because there is no room for her to exercise her choice in her marriage.

Diverse Social and Cultural Milieus in The Select Works

The select works have varied sociocultural backgrounds and milieus. The 1983 Sri Lankan Civil War, as highlighted in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, took its emotional and physical toll on people who were uprooted and displaced from Sri Lanka. The 1983 Civil War also affected the psyche of parents, who wanted their children, especially women, to get married as early as possible. Lucky's mother, a victim of the Civil War (she was driven away from her university hostel during the riots in the 1983 Civil War), forces Lucky to get married because she feels that it is only marriage that would provide a sense of security and support to her daughter. Many Sri Lankan parents thought that it was a marriage that would act as a protective force for women from all lurking dangers.

The World Unseen deals with the segregation of people based on their colour in an Apartheid driven South Africa. As depicted in the novel, the white people used to spew venom and constantly monitor the activities of black people as seen through the characters. In one of the restaurants, a waitress asks Amina to vacate her place on the grounds that the place is earmarked for whites. Similarly, one white officer named Stewart De Witt visits Miriam's house and enquires about her sister-in-law, who had married a white man. He says that interracial marriages are banned in South Africa. In addition, Amina's assistant, Jacob, a coloured man, isn't allowed to stand beside a white woman. These incidents point to the rampant racism that prevailed in South Africa in the 1950s.

The Paths of Marriage portrays the effects of colonization on women in India in the 1950s. They were denied the right to education and had to depend on men for their needs. Lakshmi, born in a poor family and in a Shudra caste, decides to leave India because she faces discrimination at school on account of her gender and caste. The interlinking of her social status, caste, and gender oppresses her, and she leaves for the U.S., seeking better pastures. "Being a girl, being poor was never easy in India. Most people in school regularly put me in place. I was poor, I was of an inferior caste, and I was also smart [p.19]." Lakshmi also chooses marriage because it would enable her to lead a better life. Through Lakshmi, Mala Kumar vividly portrays the struggles of women in India in the 1950s.

Remarking on the reason for choosing a protagonist who comes from a disadvantaged section of society, Mala Kumar says: "I chose to focus on a poor woman of the Shudra caste...It would be interesting to focus on a character who is born into a society that would not always automatically relegate her to either extreme.

Instead, I wanted her to encounter a mix of opportunity and oppression. In this way, the realities of life, chance, and luck would shape the story and character.”

Thus, the diverse backgrounds and social milieu of the select novels shape the myriad choices of the protagonists. As the 1983 Sri Lankan Civil War affected her mother, Lucky did not want her mother to suffer further, and hence, she gets married as per her wish. Deepa, primarily due to the inculcation of Indian cultural values, does not come out to her mother and stays in the closet as a lesbian. Similarly, being an Indian married woman who is deeply rooted in Indian cultural ethos, Miriam refuses to break off her marriage with Omar, though he abuses her.

Culture Shapes the Life Choices Of Individuals.

Any culture expects women to get married, have children, and be dutiful wives. So, cultural norms and practices also play a vital role in perpetuating oppression against women. If women go against the established norms, they have to face social condemnation and ridicule. Thus, women have to battle various odds, including social stigma, ostracization and rejection if they defy the parental and societal expectations and try to live their lives as they are. This becomes even more difficult for queer people because societal rigid attitudes towards people with different sexual identities persist. While some assertive women like Leyla in *I can't think Straight* resist arranged marriage and choose their paths, others like Nisha, who are not fully comfortable with their sexuality, go for arranged marriages.

Trends And Milestones in the Select Cultures

As per a Pew Research Centre survey conducted among 38,426 people in 34 countries in 2019, accepting same-sex relationships largely depends on the countries in which people live. While people in Western Europe are flexible in accepting homosexuality, the same cannot be said of those in Eastern Europe, Russia, Ukraine, the Middle East, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Middle Eastern countries seem to be less inclined to accept same-sex relationships compared to Western countries.

When it comes to South Asian countries, there is low acceptance of same-sex relationships. However, Taiwan legalized same-sex marriage in 2019, making it the first country in Asia to do so. Similarly, Nepal legalized same-sex marriages in 2023. In India, the LGBTQ communities' plea for legal recognition of same-sex marriages has not been accepted, leaving them in limbo. Though being queer is not a crime per se, people who identify themselves as queer still face harassment, discrimination, and social exclusion in their lives in many countries.

Conclusion

To reemphasize the argument of this paper, women, irrespective of their desires, are constantly under immense cultural pressure to follow societal norms like

getting married and having children. They always run the risk of facing alienation, estrangement, and ostracization when they openly disclose their concealed identities to their families. *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, *I Can't think Straight*, *The World Unseen*, and *The Paths of Marriage* show how suffocating it would be for individuals if they were made to give up their desires at the altar of family and social expectations. The intersection of cultural moorings, one's personal beliefs, race, and location shapes people's choices in their lives. A brown South Asian woman (Lucky), a married Muslim woman (Miriam), a British Indian Muslim (Leyla), a Palestinian Christian Arab woman (Tala), a South Asian immigrant in the U.S (Deepa) live in different places, hold different values, face different situations, and hence make varied choices in marriage. Thus, the choices of queer women in marriage, are invariably shaped by their struggles, their predicaments, and the circumstances in which they live.

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