

THE CHOICES IN MARRIAGE & THE SOUTH ASIAN QUEER WOMEN: AN ANALYTICAL AND CULTURAL EXPLORATION

Geetha S & Smrutisikta Mishra

*Research Scholar, Department of Humanities, National Institute of Technology Pondicherry, Karaikal,
Tamil Nadu, India*

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ABSTRACT

*Marriage is part and parcel of the lives of women. While parents want to retain their cultural identity by ensuring that their children get married, the younger generation tends to have a different take on marriage. The pressure to get married is immense for women, and if they make their own choice in marriage, they are subjected to social stigma, hostility and sometimes rejection. This paper seeks to discuss how queer women fight for their relationships battling social, cultural and familial pressures and how their struggles shape their choice in marriage by analyzing S. J. Sindu's *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* and Shamin Sarif's *I can't Think Straight*. Marriage is often tied to women's identity/lives. For Queer women, their lives become even more difficult because they face the double whammy of being women and having a different sexual identity. In S.J. Sindu's *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* Lucky, a Sri Lankan American queer woman goes for a "marriage of convenience" with Kris, a gay man, to avoid an arranged marriage. On the other hand, Nisha, the woman Lucky loves, goes for an arranged marriage by concealing her sexual identity for the fear of cultural backlash from her Sri Lankan community. In Shamin Sarif's novel, Leyla, a British Indian Muslim woman, refuses to get into an arranged marriage as her attractions are towards women. Tala, a Palestinian Christian woman, is engaged to Hani, but she is drawn towards Leyla.*

KEYWORDS: *Battling Pressures, Choice in Marriage, Cultural Identity, Fighting for relationships, Social Norms.*

INTRODUCTION

Marriage plays an integral part in women's lives. Parents feel that it is their bounden duty to marry their children, especially women, at the appropriate time, failing to consider themselves a failure as parents. Marriage is seen as a sign of enhancing the family's prestige and status among the community members rather than the personal choice of an individual. Such being the case, there is immense social, community, cultural and familial pressure on women to conform to the social dictates by getting married and settling down in their lives. In the eyes of parents, marriage is seen as a source of social security and support for women, and hence women need to get into conventional marriage to have a secured life. While studies have been focusing on same-sex relationships or same-sex marriages, not much has come to light regarding the social, familial, and cultural pressures faced by Queer women to get into an arranged marriage. The authors would like to throw some light on the choice or the lack of choice that queer women have in marriage by taking up S.J. Sindu's *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* and Shamin Sarif's *I can't think Straight* for analysis.

Marriage as a Cultural Identity for Parents

Parents always feel that women would realise the happiness that marriage would usher in 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." (141). In *I can't think Straight*, when Leyla discloses that she is gay, her mother is appalled that and shouts at her: "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 ..." (*I can't think Straight*, 154)

It is difficult for parents to accept if women marry outside their community/religion because they cannot give up "their cultural identity." The uneasiness in accepting someone outside one's community/religion finds expression in *I can't think Straight*. Lamia's parents, who are Palestinian Christians, cannot digest the fact their son-in-law would be a Muslim and hence force her to give up her relationship with him. Lamia states that her love did not culminate in marriage because "... He was a Muslim, and that was nothing less than impossible..." (*I can't think Straight*, 74). Similarly, in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, on learning that Vidya, Lucky's younger sister is in love with Jamal, who does not belong to the Sri Lankan community, Lucky's mother angrily remarks: "It won't last, Vidya... love covers up all things.....when its gone, the bad things will be there... people like him don't know the meaning of a good marriage." (155).

Social Perception of Marriage

Heterosexual marriage is the norm in society, and people with different sexualities have to hide a part of them because society looks down upon them and ostracises and isolates them from the mainstream. Marriage is more often associated with family reputation/prestige rather than a matter of an individual's personal choice. Gauthaman Ranganathan (2015), in "Forced into marriage by social pressures" drives home this point of incompatibility between the social perception of marriage and an individual's sexuality when he says: "Marriage is rarely seen as connected to one's sexuality or sexual orientation, but only as an institution that has social importance with *little personal significance*." (Ranganathan, 2015) These lines point that marriage has more social significance rather than individual significance on the lives of people.

Talking about marriage, S.J. Sindu, the author of *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, says: "... for some people, the choice isn't there. A lot of people are still forced or coerced to go through with it. The pressure for me was immense from the community...with many layers and a nuance of choice... this obsession with marriage is even greater when the child in question is a woman." (Chakrapani, 2017) Adding further, "...arranged marriages provide little or no space for conversations between the man and woman." (Ranganathan, 2015) and this puts a woman at a disadvantage because there is no room for her to exercise her choice in marriage.

Exploring the Theme of Marriage through the Prism of Queer Women

Unlike men, who have the autonomy to make their own decisions regarding their marriage, women are rarely empowered to exercise their choice in marriage. Often, they are tied down by traditions and culture and cannot take their own decisions in marriage. With respect to queer women, they are not only denied the freedom to make their own choice in marriage but are also forced/coerced into marriage due to social pressure and the fear of backlash from society and the community at large. A case in point is that of Nisha in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, who dates Lucky but is scared to come out to the open. Being masculine in her looks and attitude, Lucky admits her queerness, while Nisha being feminine does not openly proclaim her sexual identity.

In an interview's. J. Sindu, points out from Lucy's point of view, 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..." and Lucky is thus depicted as a person choosing her own but different path. (Chakrapani, 2017) While Lucky is an example of a woman choosing her own path, Nisha is a classic example of a woman bowing to social pressures by covering up her sexual identity and getting married to a heterosexual man.

Heterosexuality is the norm in society, and is "... institutionalized, naturalized and regulated both explicitly and implicitly by assuming that all people are heterosexual, marriage is a given, and all men and women fit more or less into traditional gender roles." (Amy Lind, 2003) and societal dictates often control one's sexuality.

Our sexuality is controlled by society's norms and a value...society upholds heterosexuality and a marital union between a man and a woman is ideal normative behavior. This is also referred as institutionalized heterosexuality, the set of ideas, institutions, and relationships that define the heterosexual family as the societal norm" (Amy Lind, 2013)

Adrienne Rich in her article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience" points out that "...the institutions by which women have traditionally been controlled - patriarchal motherhood, economic exploitation, the nuclear family, compulsory heterosexuality...." (2003) Marriage, from the perspective of Queers, is expressed by Michael Warner in the following lines: "The Queer critique of marriage questions the norms of marriage and encourages deviance from the norm...it is skeptical of any institution, like marriage, that is designed both to reward those inside it and discipline those outside it" (1999)

Paula Ettelbrick (1997), talking about marriage, opines: "marriage runs contrary to...the affirmation of gay identity and culture; and the validation of many forms of relationships...the right to marry is essentially to be the same as heterosexuals... the essence of liberation is not having to conform to a heterosexual mold... Marriage, as it exists today, is antithetical to my liberation as a lesbian and as a woman because it mainstreams my life and voice."

Parental Expectations on Children's Lives

Many parents want their children's lives to be shaped based on their desires. If their children defy their expectations by choosing an independent path, they end up facing rejection and hostility. This point is explained by S.J. Sindu when she says, "... for a lot of Hindu parents.... the queer child should put aside their wayward desires and conform for the greater good of the family and community... and if the child doesn't, the child is then considered selfish..." (Chakrapani, 2017)

In *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, Lucky's mother comes to know that Lucky has decided to divorce her husband Kris because he is gay and feels sad that her decision would only further alienate Lucky from the Sri Lankan community. Leyla's mother in *I can't think Straight* feels dejected that her daughter's wedding would never come through because of Leyla's open revelation about her sexual identity. Similarly, Tala's mother, on learning that her daughter has called off her wedding with Hani, laments that "... the union between Tala and Hani – handsome, good, perfect Hani- had been severed." (141)

Identity as a Social-Cultural Product

Identity is all about how one understands oneself and how social definitions define a person's self. Thus, "Identity is produced at the point of contact between essential understanding of Self and socially constructed narratives of Self." (William Connolly, 1991) Jennifer Miller in "The Constructionist Turn in Sexuality and Gender Studies" points out that as

identities are social constructs, "... in different times and places, different meanings and values dominate and influence identity. These meanings and values are transmitted through cultural texts like television, music or film and circulate in social institutions like schools, museums, and families. As a result, meanings and values change across space and time."(2020)

Michael Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) opines: "Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check... It is the name that can be given to a historical construct" According to Foucault, "a normal sexuality is as much of a construct as a natural sexuality and that there is simply no natural" sexuality."(1978). Queer theory lies on the premise that "... identities such as gay, lesbian, heterosexual are considered cultural constructions..."and that "the goal of critical theories such as Foucault is ... to question the identitiesand show how these identities are **historical and cultural constructions**. (Oksala, 2011)Thus, the views of Foucault, Jonathan Katz and Oksala point to the "social construction of homosexuality and heterosexuality" (Miller, 2020) and they challenge the idea that heterosexuality is natural and normal. Like Post-Modernist theory that views human identity to be a social construct and emphasizes on the multiplicity of perspectives, Queer theory also argues that sexuality is a social construct created by fixed social standards, beliefs and norms and refuses to accept heterosexuality as the touchstone for sexual formations.

Women's Sexuality- A rarely Discussed Aspect

The term "Queer" refers to the mismatch between one's biological sex and one's sexual desire. "Queer iswhatever at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant..." (Halperin, 1997). The aim of Queer theory is to examine sexual identities that go against the established norms of society. This theory states that sexual identities are constructed only based on social norms and beliefs and that any moral standards do not determine sexuality. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*(2006) "... male and female behavior roles are not the result of biology but are constructed and reinforced by our society through media and culture."Gayatri Gopinath, in her book *Impossible Desires*(2005) points out that female sexual desire is unthinkable because the notions of chastity and purity are always associated with women. From her point of view, a "..... no heterosexual Indian woman"... is not only excluded from the various "home" spaces ...but simply cannot be imagined..." (18) A woman, who has a different sexual identity, is always considered a shame and disgrace as seen in the novel *I can't think Straight*. Tala's mother on learning about Tala's attraction towards Leyla, yells at her by saying: "You're a disgrace! An aberration" (181).

According to Michael Foucault, "Sexuality is not a problem of fantasy; it is a problem of verbalisation..... what we do, what we are obliged to do, what we are allowed to , what we are forbidden to do in the field of sexuality.... how people live, think and speak about sexuality, what kinds of action can and cannot be done..."(1990). Coming to female sexuality, it is rarelytalked about, leave alone acknowledged. As there is no room for discussions centered on female sexuality, women attracted to other women are forced to camouflage their identities, fearing reprisal, ostracisation, and familial outrage, and some try to conceal their sexuality by going for heterosexual marriage.

A case in point is Nisha in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, who after realising the futility of pursuing her relationship with Lucky, severs it and gets ready for her marriage with a heterosexual man. Nisha says: "I don't want to spend my life fighting a war I can't win... I don't want to fight any more." (135). Women are thus constrained by social, gender and cultural norms while choosing their lives, marriage, or relationships. The fear of antagonism, negativity, and

familial backlash forces women with different sexual identities to either lead clandestine lives or conceal their sexuality and go for a conventional marriage.

FIGHTING FOR THEIR RELATIONSHIPS AND MAKING THEIR OWN CHOICE IN MARRIAGE- *MARRIAGE OF A THOUSAND LIES AND I CAN'T THINK STRAIGHT*

Marriage of A Thousand Lies

Lucky, the protagonist of *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, refuses to be drawn into a conventional marriage as she is attracted towards her childhood friend Nisha. She goes for a “marriage of convenience” with Kris, a gay, so that she can continue to pursue her relationship with Nisha without the knowledge of anyone. As her mother had disowned earlier on learning about her attraction towards women, Lucky decides that it is only her “marriage” that will help her to assuage her mother’s feelings towards her and that she can regain her mother’s lost trust.

She is disturbed on learning that Nisha is getting married and says she would fight hard to bring Nisha home, but is not sure whether Nisha wants to come with her. On Nisha’s wedding day, Lucky, in her last-ditch attempt, tries to convince Nisha to come with her so that both of them can live together. But with Nisha stoutly refusing to call off her wedding, Lucky comes home and informs her mother of her decision to divorce Kris. All through the novel, Lucky sacrifices her individual identity to make everyone in the family happy but finally makes her own choice of annulling her marriage with Kris and being with her mother.

Unlike Lucky, Nisha is fickle-minded in taking a decision regarding her coming out to her parents. She agrees to the marriage fixed by her parents, but at the same time pursues her liaison with Lucky. Fearing cultural backlash and realising the futility of pursuing her relationship with Lucky, Nisha ultimately bids adieu to Lucky and gets ready for her marriage. Thus Nisha succumbs to cultural and familial pressures by covering up her sexual identity and making her choice of getting married to a heterosexual man.

Though everyone uses the word ‘trauma,’ it does not arise from a single event, and no one fixed meaning can be attributed to it. It is a term used to refer “... to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self...” (Michelle Balaev, 2008) From Sigmund Freud’s perspective, “..... any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield.” is called trauma. “It has the power to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy...” (1961).

Trauma, from Freud’s point of view, “is an unrepresentable event that fundamentally fragments the psyche” (Nasarullah, Mambrol, 2018) and “...profoundly impacts the self’s emotional organisation and perception of the external world.” (Dianna Kenny, 2016) Lucky in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* is subjected to emotional trauma because her mother pressurizes her to have a child, chides her for not being a dutiful wife and a proper brown woman. When her mother stops talking to her on learning about her sexual liaison with Nisha, Lucky is emotionally shattered and her angst is expressed in the following lines: “... Amma doesn’t call..I keep waiting for the phone to ring... but still nothing” (209). Lucky yearns to meet her mother: “.... Amma’s never going to call back... I have to go back to Amma’s house” (210) “The longer I wait to go back to Amma’s house, the harder it’ll be” (211)

Freud’s Psychoanalytical theory states that “repression is “the prototype of the Unconscious.” (1923) The term Unconscious refers to the feelings and thoughts that are hidden from the conscious mind of the individual, and such “repressed thoughts” come out in various forms such as dreams. Freud calls such “coming out hidden desires” as “the

return of the repressed.”(1915). As Lucky’s mother in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* avoids Lucky on learning about her attraction towards women, she “represses her sexual identity” by marrying Kris, a gay man so that she can appease her mother and regain her lost trust. All through the novel, Lucky resorts to lying to conceal her “hidden self” from others. But ultimately her hidden identity comes to the fore when her mother discovers her sexual intimacy with Nisha and disowns her. Nisha’s ultimate decision of not calling off her wedding shatters Lucky, and at the end, Lucky decides to snap her relationship with Kris and remain with her mother “as she is.” Lucky removes her wedding photo from the frame and buries it in the garden, thus symbolically ending her relationship with Kris.

The 1983 Sri Lankan Civil War profoundly impacts Lucky, who draws a woman with no arm that reflects the loneliness and emptiness of Sri Lankan women, who were caught in the Civil War. Lucky’s hidden sexual identity, her mother’s disownment, her sister’s elopement with a man from a different community and Kris, her husband considering his marriage with Lucky to be a real one cause repercussions in Lucky’s life and in her relationships. Stef Craps disagrees with the contention that “trauma results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event”(2013) and this point is exemplified by Lucky, who is subjected to trauma not due to a single factor but because of a host of events in her life, including her marriage to Kris.

I Can’t Think Straight

Tala, a Palestinian Christian woman, is engaged to Hani, a Palestinian, but does not love him intensely as is expected of her. Her meeting with Leyla, a British Indian Muslim woman changes Tala’s life, and she is slowly drawn to her. Her attraction towards Leyla becomes a mutual one, and soon it culminates in a physical relationship between them. Unlike Leyla, who believes that there is nothing wrong in their relationship, Tala feels guilty and says to Leyla: “... It’s not easy. It’s not acceptable. I don’t think it is acceptable to cheat on your fiancé anywhere in the world” (83). Unable to withstand the guilt that pricks her conscience, Tala backs out of her relationship with Leyla and moves to Jordan. At the same time, she is not sure whether her decision to marry Hani is the right move, and expresses her jittery to her father in these lines. “... I don’t love him. Not like I should.... I realise now that I have been dreading my wedding day, everyday. Dreading it.” (138)

When Tala meets Leyla towards the end of the novel, Tala unambiguously tells Leyla that she cannot come out to her parents because her Middle East Culture and her family will not accept such a relationship. But Leyla insists that Tala needs to come out to her parents about her identity. “I don’t want you to be my lover at home and ‘friend’ elsewhere. I can’t live like that.” (174). Following Leyla’s ultimatum, Tala discloses to her parents and fiancé about her attraction towards Leyla. Though Tala is confused and indecisive initially, but at the end, she accepts her true self and makes her own choice of having a life with Leyla.

Tala’s fear of cultural backlash makes her to repress her sexual identity, and as hidden desires always manifest in various forms, Tala’s other self also finally comes out in the form of her revelation to her parents and her fiancé about her attraction towards Leyla. The protagonists of *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* and *I can’t think Straight* Lucky and Tala are subjected to trauma, and “... various complex psychological and social factors...” (Nasarullah, Mambrol, 2018) influence their “traumatic experience”(Nasarullah, Mambrol, 2018) and affect their relationships with others. ”

The Commonalities in Cultures

Cutting across cultures, same-sex relationships are frowned upon and do not gain social and familial approbation. In *I can't think Straight*, when Tala utters "I'm gay" her mother is appalled and says: "..... Homosexuality sounded like a reckless and disgusting science experiment....The very word.... was so far from the reality of marriage..."(181) On similar lines, Lucky's mother in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* refuses to accept her daughter's way of life by saying "This is no kind of life. I cannot accept a daughter like this..." (230). Be it Lucky's mother in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* or Leyla's father or Tala's parents in *I can't think Straight*, parents never take into consideration the private lives of their children while making decisions regarding their children's lives.

Parents refuse to give up their cultural and religious identity when it comes to their marriage of their children. In *I can't think Straight*, Lamia, the eldest sister of Tala learns about Tala's attraction towards Leyla, a British Indian Muslim woman but is doubtful whether Tala would be able to fight the ".....battles of Muslim against Christian community." (81). Lucky in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* states that her mother would not allow her to step out of the house without wearing her thali (mangalsutra), the sign of a married woman. Children, especially women, are expected not to flout the conventions laid out for them in marriage. On learning that Lucky is planning for a divorce, her mother unhappily remarks: "The community will hate you....They'll blame you for driving away a good man like Kris." (*Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, 269). If women defy the expectations of their parents by making their own choice, they are subjected to ostracisation, alienation, hostility and sometimes even rejection as seen in the case of Lucky in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* and Tala and Leyla in *I can't think Straight*.

Marriage and the South Asian Culture

In South Asian Culture, nothing outside of marriage is acceptable, and this is emphasised by Lucky when she says: "... outside of stolen kisses at parties and dates masquerading as day trips to outlet malls, we will have nothing." (*Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, 126) Women need to have feminine looks- having long hair, blushing, not wearing men's dresses and looking pretty. Seeing Lucky's arms which are hard, her mother remarks: "You need to think about the way you're looking to others." (22) Similarly women do not have much say in their marriage, and many a time, they are forced to marry according to their parents' wishes. Shyama, the eldest sister of Lucky gives up her relationship with her lover and marries a person of her parents' choice. When Lucky questions her of the same, Shyama replies with a tinge of bitterness: "They'd kill me. This thing with Dave won't last forever." (*Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, 87) Lucky is also forced to go through the process of 'marrying Kris, a gay, in order to gain her mother's acceptance and to conceal her sexuality from others.

Marriage, Middle East Culture and Cultural Identity

Tala, the protagonist of *I can't think Straight* points out the conservative nature of Amman society/ Middle East Culture when she says: "... Living together with Hani not in Amman"(12). After her physical intimacy with Leyla, she realises that her Middle East Culture does not approve same-sex relationships and says the same to Leyla: "This is not the way to live....Nobody lives like this. Not openly" (83). Be it South Asian or the Middle East Culture, parents feel that it is 'marriage' that will ensure security for women. In *I can't think Straight*, Tala's mother feels if only Tala's father had made her to go through the process of marriage, Tala would have realised "marrying someone was better than a hundred otherthings she could decide to do" (141). Similarly, in the Middle East Culture, there are always conflicts between Jews and non-Jews over their cultural identities, and this is seen in the case of David, Zina's lover, who refuses to marry her

citing his Jewish and her non-Jewish identity. He "... can't imagine being married to a non-Jew.... His Jewish culture is a huge part of his identity. He's being open about not wanting to give it up." (107)

CONCLUSIONS

Women always run the risk of facing alienation, estrangement and ostracisation when they openly disclose their concealed identities and try to live their lives as they are. Parents perceive marriage to be the right solution to cure homosexuality when their children come out to them. This is exemplified in the novel *I can't think Straight* when Tala's mother contemplates marrying Tala off following her revelation that she is gay. "... There were ways to get rid of it... foremost among these was a good marriage..." (182). Women have to battle social, cultural and familial pressures if they "want to make their own choice in their lives" as seen in the case of Lucky in *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* who fights hard for her relationship with Nisha. Some assertive women like Leyla in *I can't think Straight* resist arranged marriage and choose their own paths, but others like Nisha, who are not fully comfortable in coming out go for arranged marriage without disclosing their hidden selves.

As exemplified by the protagonists in the above discussed novels, the choice that queer women make in marriage is invariably shaped by their own struggles, their predicaments and the circumstances in which they live. Further studies can be taken up by analysing queer women's lives in other cultures or by analysing other works in South Asian culture so as to gain an understanding of whether queer women in various cultures have the freedom to exercise their choice in marriage or whether they are forced to give into marriage.

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