

## Marriage, Home and Women's *Koinónia* in *Night of Henna* (2005)

Iulia RĂȘCANU<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*The notion of arranged marriage stands at the intersection of the Eastern and the Western discourses, being an issue that raises questions and a lot of public debate. As there are still diasporic South Asian communities in the West that still comply with norms from 'home', the hosting societies may find it interesting to understand cultural practices that are totally different from theirs. Arranged marriage seems to be a particularly interesting one as it involves elements of personal choice and independence, so characteristic of and valuable in Western societies. Apart from the issue of marriage, this paper also explores the concept of 'sisterhood' as a feature of non-Western societies and of their women's collective consciousness. The bonding between these women is very strong prior to marriage and to migration. Even if these last two factors affect the female bond, this paper shows that it can be re-interpreted and re-created in other forms even post marriage and migration.*

**Keywords:** *arranged marriage, love, sisterhood, koinónia, culture, immigrant community*

### Introduction

The concept of (heterosexual) marriage in South Asian cultures is perceived as different from Western understandings that emphasise the principles of freedom and personal choice. Apart from the fact that marriage practices are rather various on the Indian subcontinent, one may add that the value placed on the traditional family as the core of society is a common feature of these cultures. Family – society – culture (and often, religion) is the framework accepted as the norm. Whenever the existent structure is threatened by external elements or factors, many members of the respective community take a stand in order to preserve their culture. Migration is a powerful factor which inevitably affects cultures, both of the sending and of the receiving country. For Muslim communities, the institution of family and marriage is particularly

---

<sup>1</sup> Iulia Rașcanu, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania  
iulia.nicole@gmail.com

influenced, especially in the case of second- and third-generation immigrants who may prefer to marry outside their community and religion.

'sisterhood', understood as *koinónia*<sup>2</sup>, represents the bonding between women, a bond that transgresses limitations of space, race and class. For this reason, this concept is also used here as 'transnational networks' of women. *Koinónia* must not be seen as a closed concept or relationship: the women of a *koinónia* are not to be viewed as maintaining the bond physically forever; a *koinónia* may be interrupted by various factors (such as migration, lived experience, pain, cultural and religious norms, sexism, and so on); nevertheless, the bond (understood in immaterial terms) remains. 'sisterhood' as *koinónia* is not to be understood as the synonym of 'global sisterhood'<sup>3</sup>, a concept promoted moreover by white feminists and contested by many non-white feminists<sup>4</sup>.

Love/marriage and 'sisterhood' are two concepts embedded in that of 'home'. In diasporic terms, 'home' can have a variety of meanings. Most importantly, it is a mixture of meanings that can hold on both to the private and to the public space, being in their turn embedded in the national space of a country. 'Home' is indeed about belonging – an extremely fluid concept, just as one's identity. As an immigrant, identity and the perception of 'home' becomes even more varied and prone to further transformations. Gender complicates the meaning of 'home' as the limitations of the private space are brought into the light, being inherently linked by patriarchal views to the woman's role in society.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'sisterhood' is understood as a mixture between female bonding or solidarity between sisters or cousin-sisters expanding to relationships between mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters, as well as between friends. Additionally, 'sisterhood' may be used concomitantly with the Greek name *koinónia* – in order to point directly to female solidarity and not to the debated feminist concept. It covers a variety of meanings such as 'community', 'communion' and 'communication', among others, altogether. See <http://biblehub.com/greek/2842.htm> or <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/koinonia.html>. Although the word has a strong Christian meaning, it is used here to underline the complexity of female bonding.

<sup>3</sup> See the works edited by Robin Morgan (1970, 1984, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> See Angela Davis (1981, 1989), C.T. Mohanty (1991), Moraga and Azaldúa (1981), Hill Collins (1990). Yet, bell hooks (1984) pleads for 'sisterhood' of feminists beyond the limits of race, seeing debates of feminists as lessons from which they can learn.

### Plot

Hassan Zee's film has as a protagonist a young Pakistani girl born in America who is in the process of defining her identity and of gaining her personal independence. The spectators are told (but not shown) that as a young girl, Hava (the protagonist) had been sent away to Pakistan by her parents in order to be totally exposed to their home culture. After nine years – a period completely absent from the film –, the girl returns to America assumingly being ready to become her cousin Salman's wife. Hava's father, a poor immigrant barely able to sustain his family, had promised the daughter into marriage to her much more well-to-do brother-in-law's son when the girl was still a child. After Hava's return, the father systematically postpones giving the news to the daughter allowing her to get used to living in America after nine years of absence.

Nonetheless, during this time Hava finds a job and a white boyfriend and the prospect of getting married to Salman is unhappily received by the girl. Apart from fulfilling her love, the protagonist also wants to be able to go to university and get a permanent job, two accomplishments that stand against the norms of her community.

In the end, on the night of her wedding, the director introduces a character that impedes the wedding to take place. It is the groom's white girlfriend who voices a story of true love and personal freedom that seems to be stronger than 'old' Pakistani customs.

### 1. Women's *kóinonia* in *Night of Henna*

Apart from being a method that ensures that ethnic and religious norms are still followed post migration, the sending of girls from migrant communities back to their parents' 'homeland' is also a way of controlling the girls' sexuality as young women and potential brides. At the same time, empirical research has shown that the bonding between women in South Asian cultures is a very strong one, the interruption of this connection being seen as painful for the women involved.

Hava's physical separation from her mother when she was sent away to Pakistan is accompanied by an absence that goes beyond spatial limitations. The director does not focus enough on the consequences of such an absence and simply creates a few scenes in the beginning of the film illustrating the girl's pain. In one of these scenes, one may see Hava's first morning after her return in the country where she was born, America.

Hava wakes up in her childhood bedroom, she looks around happily as if enjoying the feeling of waking up in a sweet familiar place called 'home', then, covering herself with a shawl (a sign of decency even inside the house), she goes straight to the kitchen where she finds her mother. The latter is singing happily while washing the dishes, on a sunny afternoon, pleased to be finally reunited with her daughter<sup>5</sup>.

In the following scene, there is a touching moment between mother and daughter in which the girl openly expresses her sense of homelessness and of longing to be with her mother during her stay in Pakistan. The absence of her mother's caring is deplored by the now adult Hava who mentions the absence of her mother's hands that could have cooked for her and could have combed her hair, two familiar activities that girls share with their mothers. The intimacy and the sense of communion illustrated by this absence are not specific only to women from the subcontinent, in particular to mothers and daughters. An element of childhood psychology, this bonding is also achieved among women of other cultures and religions. However, 'food' (cooking) and hair-combing are frequently used as signifiers of female bonding in South Asian diasporic novels and films<sup>6</sup>. The two activities presuppose a sort of interaction that goes beyond verbal communication. It is a sort of communion (*koinónia*) that may be achieved in the lack of verbal communication so that the participants in the *koinónia* can become completely involved. Simple gestures between the giver (in this case, the mother) and the receiver (the daughter) weave the thread of their communion. It is similar to the *koinónia* achieved through story-telling: the telling of stories that flow into each other, linked through metaphysical strands, stories told by mothers (or sometimes grandmothers) to daughters (and grand-daughters)<sup>7</sup>.

---

4 If one looks both at *Night of Henna* (2005) and at *Bicycle Bride* (2010), one can see that Hassan Zee builds stereotypical mothers. In the first film, the mother is soft and caring, taking her daughter's side and sharing secrets with her. In contrast, the other character, from the second film, is portrayed in a negative manner, appearing as a dominating wife and mother, aggressively and desperately looking for a husband for her daughter, prohibiting her to go to college, the place where girls 'get spoiled'. The two mothers from Zee's films belong to different social classes but are, nevertheless, connected by the same concern for their daughters - to get them married to the 'right' men.

<sup>6</sup> Cooking is a central element of female bonding in novels such as *One Hundred Shades of White* (Preethi Nair, 2003) and *The Mistress of Spices* (Chitra B. Divakaruni, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Hair-combing and story-telling are found in *The Namesake* (director Mira Nair, 2006).



Hava and her mother, on the day of Hava's return. The girl is telling her mother how much she missed her while she was away.

Zee tries to re-create a moment between mother and daughter by resorting to the audience's emotions; thus, Hava speaks about her mother's hands and eyes that were not there for her when she wanted them; the young woman takes her mother's hands and touches them, looks into her eyes, as if trying to regain what had been lost. There is indeed a sense of rediscovery between daughter and mother, a feeling that supported a bond that has been interrupted by Hava's forced departure to Pakistan. The mother's reaction to the girl's return home shows that the mother's role in the custom of sending the young girls to the 'homeland' is insignificant. Wishing to enjoy her time with Hava, she is saddened at the prospect of having to part with her again when the father gives her the news about the girl's approaching marriage to her cousin Salman. The patriarchal voice of the father though interferes with the bond between the two women saying that 'every girl has to leave her father's house (...)' and remains inflexible about the protagonist's marriage.

The women's bond is strengthened by the existence of secrets that Hava and her mother share (mainly the girl's activities performed in the public space, such as Hava's getting a paid job in a café and her visit to the college). Secrets are floating, immaterial strands that hold women together. Like story-telling, like gestures and activities considered feminine, secrets are also shared. Similarly, secrets are characterized by the fact that they involve both speaking and non-speaking communication (see verbal and non-verbal *koinónia*): secrets are given and received while they are meant not to be further given away.

However, when she starts having secrets of a romantic kind (related to her boyfriend Justin), the girl no longer shares her secrets with her mother. Sensing that this is a secret her mother will have to reveal to her father, Hava decides it is safer to share it with someone who is closer to the young couple, Babu, the owner of the café where she works. By giving precedence to her friendship with Babu, the protagonist does not affect the mother-daughter relationship. Friendship only exists in parallel with the *koinónia* between mother and daughter.

The other protagonist from the first-generation of Pakistani immigrant women, aunt Zakia is a fragile sad character who has to live with the pain of having lost the *koinónia* with her own daughter forever. Mother of two, Salman and a daughter whose name the director keeps secret, aunt Zakia suffers for being totally separated from a daughter whose image she keeps alive by maintaining the girl's bedroom intact. Ostracized by her family for not giving up her white boyfriend/husband, the young woman looks back smilingly at her mother from the framed picture in the room. When she is alone, aunt Zakia goes there, sits on the bed, takes her daughter's picture, looks at it with love and sadness at a happy confident American(ised) woman, places it to her heart, closes her eyes and keeps it there for some time. In only one speech-less scene, the 'transnational network', understood as the metaphysical *koinónia* between mother and daughter, in which the mother refuses to let go of her absent daughter, is re-created. The director tries to emphasise the family conflicts and the pain these create due to taboo exogamous relationships in the Pakistani community of San Francisco, in which youngsters who transgress the community norms of 'love' and marriage have to face community ostracisation and stigma.

The unnamed character (Zakia's daughter) is created for two reasons: 1) to inform the audience that women like her have no power and no place within their ethnic communities if norms are not obeyed and 2) to prepare the terrain for the conflict created by Hava's imminent marriage to Salman and her feelings of love for Justin. Nonetheless, there are many incongruities regarding this specific issue. As already mentioned, the end of the film portrays the protagonist courageously voicing her love for Justin and challenging her father, representative of the entire community. Through Hava, Zee reiterates a marriage custom as being 'old' and unfair: 'For how long are you going to keep up with these traditions?', the girl yells.

Although we are told that Zakia's daughter had to leave the community for not complying with its marital norms, this time Zee decides to illustrate a progressive community that changes its views overnight. In his wish to portray empowered hybrid Pakistani American women who make their own decisions in a socio-cultural and religious context that allows them to have equal opportunities, just like other (American) women outside the community, Zee does not succeed in empowering Pakistani women who live in America. This statement is supported by the fact that the director leaves the real progressive female character (aunt Zakia's daughter) stranded – in a place without a name, accompanied by an anonymous man, nobody knowing where and how she is. Instead, the director makes another mistake by privileging the woman's brother, Salman, who enjoys the blessings of his family when he is allowed to break the marriage with Hava and (most probably) marry his white girlfriend. By doing this, Zee replaces the *koinónia* between mother and daughter (aunt Zakia and her daughter) with the bond between mother and son, supported by the community consent, on the wedding night.

In *Night of Henna*, Zee favours the American society over immigrant communities as the only one that can offer individuals such as Hava opportunities for personal development and independence. The communion between women is portrayed as being threatened by patriarchal community norms that can nevertheless be easily broken if a 'good Pakistani girl' who, despite having been brought up in Pakistan itself, defends principles of personal freedom and autonomy supported by the Western discourse.

## 2. 'Love', arranged marriage and 'home'

In his first feature film, Zee focuses on the topic of heterosexual 'love' as arranged marriage. The film has been marketed as a story about love that 'has no boundaries', the DVD cover of the film bearing the caption 'Is love meant to be found or arranged?', a rhetorical question whose answer the spectators are expected to already know. The title, *Night of Henna* reflects the significance of the night that precedes the wedding in subcontinental cultures, when the hands and feet of brides are decorated with henna tattoos. Probably inspired from another South Asian diasporic director, Gurinder Chadha (in *Bend It Like Beckham*, 2002), Zee also shortly acts towards the end of the film, dancing at Hava and Salman's wedding,

probably with the intention of giving the film a more comical side, which until then had been missing.

Apart from his failure in being a second Chadha, Zee also exaggerates in portraying 'true love' as the one in which partners fall in love (understood as personal choice), presented as the opposite of arranged marriage – the worst thing that can happen to a girl, as the film shows. By essentialising arranged marriage as being inherently a negative cultural custom, the director actually empowers inter-racial relationships between whites and Pakistanis, turning them into a norm that replaces another norm. It is rather unclear if the filmmaker, probably in an attempt to get rid of the burden of representation, finishes by actually demonising the Pakistani culture itself by creating a white male character (Justin's friend, Matt) who tells the audience 'Muslim girls don't talk to men. (...) Weird culture'.

It is unclear if the director uses this as a negative comment at his own community (that Zee has repeatedly criticised as being 'old' and 'backward', usually by using stereotypes) or as a sarcastic remark against ignorant white communities. The first interpretation may be rather valid as Zee also brings in Babu's warning to Justin: he is going to get hurt if he wants a relationship with Hava because 'she's Muslim' and 'she's not interested in an American guy'. Zee barely touches upon the religious issue without going deeper than that, and safely returning to 'culture', a culture that appears prohibitive for women who do not have access to education, their role in society and family being an established one and belonging exclusively to the private space. Hava herself complains to Justin that she is not allowed to make decisions of her own, especially those regarding her future husband.

Work and education, two elements of the public space, are both part of the protagonist's hybridisation process. Nevertheless, her transformation would not have been complete unless she married Justin (instead of Salman). Only when love comes into the picture, the triangle made up of work, education and love is able to project Hava as part of a multicultural 'home', a 'home' where cultural and religious boundaries are finally transgressed. Yet, Zee makes it clear that these boundaries can only be crossed by Pakistani Americans if they are assimilated by the culture of the receiving country (America). Cultural hybridisation is accepted only at a level where the public sphere is not affected. Towards the end of the film, for example, in the wedding scene in which Hava and Salman have been



allowed to follow their hearts (therefore, choose their own partners), the only things reminding us of things 'non-American' are the rich colourful clothes and the rituals specific to Eastern weddings, as well as the mixture of Sufi music and Western rhythms. Justin has also been portrayed so as to indicate that hybridisation happens not only in the case of non-white Americans (such as Hava and Salman), but also of white Americans.

Apart from his Pakistani friend, Babu, and his first major being in Eastern music, Justin's room is also a space marked by Eastern elements (such as pillow covers and other elements of interior design). The director emphasises the perfect match between Hava and Justin: the girl is willing to be guided by Justin to get an education; Justin is open to non-white cultures. Zee manages to create an exotic, orientalist approach to 'love', in which the girl's dreams of freedom and love are achieved exclusively via the (happy) relationship with a white man.

Having returned to America, Hava experiences 'love'. Shy and scared at first, the girl's first feelings of 'love' are expressed by daydreaming. Dreaming (or daydreaming) is a trope that Zee uses against that of the prohibitive reality of her home: in her dreams, the girl is free; in reality, her freedom is bounded by cultural norms, duty and respect for the family. It is not only Hava that is daydreaming, but Justin as well. Daydreaming is the bond between them until they become a couple. As Hava and Justin are one day coming out of Justin's college, the girl tells him about her dream of being able to get an education and a job. The man promises to take her out of what is projected as oppressive (family/community/ culture/religion): 'I'll help you with your dreams'.

The trope of dreaming, mixed with that of water (frequently appearing in the film either as rain or as a lake) may symbolise feelings of love, sexuality, and sadness. Wherever Hava and Justin are shown together, the setting includes a form of water. When they first meet, it is love at first sight. In that episode, Hava and her family were returning from the airport when their taxi (Hava's father worked as a taxi driver) broke down while Justin was cycling. In the background there is a calm lake on the surface of which sunrays are shining, illustrative of the warm feelings that rise in the boy's heart, as it is seen in the close-up image of his face.

From here, their love story is sprinkled with daydreaming, flirting, the first touch, the sharing of deepest secrets, the impossibility of fulfilling their love, feelings of sadness and final reunion. Daydreaming is a static, non-performative activity that contains images, sounds and senses. After

Justin meets Hava again in Babu's café, he starts dreaming about her. Right before that, Zee introduced the basis of their blooming love. Celebrating his birthday with friends in the café, Justin closes his eyes in order to make a wish. When he opens them, the camera focuses on the door through which Hava comes in. In his dreams, she always appears alone, running on the seashore, the water touching her bare legs coming out of a long dress. There is a lot of movement in his dream – the girl running, the waves on the shore, Hava's wild loose hair flowing in the wind. Zee uses these are signifiers in order to express the woman's sexuality and freedom offered by the sentiment of love and of being loved.

At some point, Hava and Justin start doing things together: Justin takes her to see his college, they go around, visiting the city. At 01: 07:52 the frame changes and shows the two of them together on the beach. Justin's dream has come true: now it is him who runs on the sea shore, arms spread like a bird in flight (symbolising freedom and happiness); Hava is static but the man comes and guides her through the sparkling playful waves. For the first time, Hava, a Muslim woman who according to her religion is expected to wear full-body clothes, including gloves to cover her hands and arms, is shown in a sleeveless top. Love removes boundaries of religion, culture and race.

The water metaphor is also met in Chada's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993): once, Asha (one of the protagonists), confused about her role as a woman in the diasporic community she is part of, finds herself in the sea, looking for her *chappal* (shoe), and is 'saved' by a white gentleman. In the next scene, she is daydreaming about a young beautiful and rich Asha being chased by a charming man when she suddenly wakes up, being sprinkled by water. Water is here a metaphor that stands both for love and for liberation. Running means movement and freedom ('running away from' or simply being free), a metaphor also found in *Bicycle Bride* (2010) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002).

The flight of birds in the sky is also reminding of free movement – freedom, letting off, leaving behind, starting anew. Interestingly, the same metaphors can be interpreted differently. When one day Hava comes to say goodbye to Justin as she was about to get married to Salman, she explains to him that her happiness should not make her parents unhappy ('I can't ruin the life of my parents'). The setting of this scene also includes water, this time the lake. Hava and Justin meet on the dock over the lake. There is a series of sharp close-ups on the protagonists' faces, with hazy foliage in

the background, symbolising uncertainty and imminent danger (their relationship is over, she is to get married to someone else). After the girl asks him to forget about her and walks away, there is a shot of a stock of birds flying away over the glittery water – an allegory of his losing her as she flies out of his life.

Prior to this encounter, the dialogue between Hava and her mother places the bond between mother (a first-generation immigrant) and daughter (a second-generation immigrant) at the junction between patriarchal ideology and religious belief. Her mother comes into the girl's room in order to tell her about her upcoming marriage and to show her the picture of the 'prince of [her] dreams'. The mother is soft but unyielding in the decision to get Hava married to Salman and asks her to 'come out of [her] dreams'. As one may read from the mother's monologue, the community of Pakistani is one excessively patriarchal: a woman must 'not say no to [her] husband whatever he says, whatever he does, just bow [her] head down in front of him' because 'men are always right', as the woman says. Indeed, Zee attempts to portray Pakistani men as oppressive, but he also shows that they can be understanding, caring and eventually bending all the rules by which they used to live. Hava's own father goes through several stages, from a rigid but caring father to one who accepts her daughter's decisions regarding her life.

### 3. Conclusions

The bonding among women of the Pakistani community in general and that between the women of this family has a certain significance for them but it does not seem strong enough to impose wishes and to change existing orders and hierarchies. Mothers, despite being loving and caring, can but suffer for the loss of their daughters who either marry men they do not love, chosen by their fathers (a cultural practice among Muslims), or who simply break away from this system and marry outside the community, thus being instantly ostracised.

The issue of arranged marriage is a delicate one in that, being a long-standing cultural practice in some communities (including immigrant ones), it must be carefully approached even if only as the topic of a piece of art (literature, film etc.). Director Hassan Zee's good intentions regarding the liberation of diasporic South Asian women (in particular Pakistani and Indian) from the oppression of culture and the control of men, as portrayed

in the movie, translate moreover in an unfair image of a community characterised as 'backward' mainly, if only, through Western lenses. Additionally, these women's empowerment is viciously transferred into the hands of white women who simply need to voice their will and re-establish order.

The protagonist can only be 'empowered' by hanging on to the love for the man she has chosen, by this criticising the practice of arranged marriage. Her pseudo-empowerment is also demonstrated during her wedding night when she eventually finds the courage to shout at her father 'why are you doing this to me?' and at her husband-to-be '(...) why are you marrying me?'. In fact, it is the white woman (Salman's girlfriend) who is the real powerful character, with Hava only following suit. It is the white girlfriend who interrupts the marriage while the protagonist was silently accepting her defeated position, exchanging tearful glances with Justin.

Hava's process of emancipation and Americanisation was thus meant to be the protagonist's empowerment in Zee's view, but it was taken over in one gesture by the white girlfriend. The filmmaker ignorantly steps onto an area that is obviously not his, empowering a character that had been given little attention throughout the film. The white woman has become the liberator of both young men and women of the Pakistani community and the voice that facilitates the gluing of cultures and religions. Zee does it too easily and too fast. Even more than that, by placing this scene towards the end of the movie, he makes it final, leaving no room for questioning, conflicts and further (re)negotiations.

## Bibliography

1. DAVIS, A. (1981), *Women, Race, and Class*. New York: Random House.
2. \_\_\_\_\_. (1989), *Women, Culture, and Politics*. New York: Random House.
3. DIVAKARUNI, C. B. (1997), *The Mistress of Spices*. London: Doubleday.
4. HILL Collins, P. (1990), *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
5. HOOKS, b. (1984), *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. London: Pluto Press.

6. MOHANTY, C. T. (1991), "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse." *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Ed. Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Rousso and Lourdes Torres. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 51-80.
7. MORAGA, C. and Gloria. E. AZALDÚA (eds.). (1981), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*. Persephone Press.
8. MORGAN, Robin (ed.). (1970), *Sisterhood is Powerful. An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. New York: Vintage Books.
9. \_\_\_\_\_. (1984), *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1996. First published by Garden City, New York: Anchor/Doubleday.
10. \_\_\_\_\_. (2003), *Sisterhood is Forever: The Women's Anthology for a New Millenium*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Singapore: Washington Square Press.
11. NAIR, P. (2003), *One Hundred Shades of White*. London: HarperCollins Publishers

### Filmography

12. CHADHA, G. (1993), *Bhaji on the Beach*.  
\_\_\_\_\_. 2002. *Bend It Like Beckham*.
13. NAIR, M. (2006), *The Namesake*.
14. ZEE, H. (2005), *Night of Henna*.  
\_\_\_\_\_. (2010), *Bicycle Bride*.

### Webliography

*koinónia*. <http://biblehub.com/greek/2842.htm> or  
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/koinonia.html>.