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**Gendered Expectations, Personal Choice, and Social  
Compatibility in Western Muslim Marriages**

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**Gendered Expectations, Personal Choice, and Social  
Compatibility in Western Muslim Marriages**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

For my parents, who try hard to understand me and support me despite not always agreeing with me. For immigrant parents everywhere trying to figure out how to respond to their children's shifting identities in a challenging and complicated space. For marriage-minded Muslims who are experiencing difficulties in finding suitable spouses.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Abstract**

# **Gendered Expectations, Personal Choice, and Social Compatibility in Western Muslim Marriages**

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This study explores some major themes in relation to marriage among contemporary Western Muslims. These themes include gendered ideals and expectations of the potential spouse, generational differences, inter-religious marriages for Muslim women, and individual choice and parental authority in mate selection. It re-evaluates the Islamic notion of marital compatibility (*kafa'a*) and shows how this notion is understood and can be applied to contemporary Western Muslims. Due to little academic research on the problem particularly of unavailable spouses, the study relies primarily on blogs, online discussions of marriage among Muslims, and internet articles on Western Muslim marriages. The dilemma faced by Western Muslims, particularly females, is that there is a lack of compatible available husbands for them. The study finds that, according to marriage-minded women, this unavailability is largely due to traditional expectations of gender roles from potential husbands contrasted against the women's unconventionally older ages, focus on education and career, and overall understanding of power dynamics in marriage. The study also explores changing methods of mate selection among Western Muslims, which include services offered by Islamic centers, Internet matchmaking, and marriage events—where the average male participant is younger than the average female participant. As the age of marriage-minded females increases, their individual choice is more recognized in their marriage while their options of suitable men decreases significantly. Many of them therefore turn to interfaith marriages, which are not recognized by Islamic law, although some religious authorities across the West them on the basis of necessity. Western Muslim women are in a unique but complicated space where they are struggling to maintain their personal ideals of education and careers and are seeking partners who share these ideals; yet, with the tension between men's expectations of women and women's of men during courtship, and the role of family in mate selection, the problem of marriage becomes more complex with the various axes contributing to it.

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## INTRODUCTION

I recently attended the wedding of an Afghan bride and a Pakistani Pashtun groom. Many of the guests had suggested, directly after the engagement was made public, that it had been a love marriage, for what else could explain the union of a couple who, even if they were of the same Pashtun ethnicity, did not belong to the same nation?<sup>1</sup> The family assured everyone, however, that the marriage was not the son's choice; his sisters had known and liked the girl because of her good, Islamic conduct and regular attendance at the mosque, and thus proposed to her family for her hand in marriage to their brother. This narrative seems to have been produced purely in order to legitimate the marriage: the marriage would not be considered proper until and unless the family had interfered in it and insisted that it was completely arranged—preferably with no choice offered to either the groom or the bride. While it is possible that questions about the legitimacy of the union arose because of the national differences between the two parties, I propose that the deeper issue was that of the tension between individual choice and parental authority—for arranged marriages typically do not take place between parties of different national, ethnic, or linguistic groups.<sup>2</sup>

This study intends to discuss the problem of marriage among Muslims in minority contexts, wherever they are in a majority non-Muslim setting but particularly in the West. In doing so, it raises the issue of generational changes and differences between parents' expectations in their child's potential marriage partner as opposed to the children's own preferences and expectations. As such, it highlights and explores at least three main themes

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan share the same culture, language, and history, marriages between them are not common.

<sup>2</sup> Some research shows that self-initiated marriages among Muslims often take place between partners of different linguistic or ethnic groups, while strictly arranged marriages tend to be between partners of the same linguistic or ethnic community. See, for example, Denise Al-Johar (2005). "Muslim Marriages in America: Reflecting New Identities." In *The Muslim World*, vol. 95, Issue 4, 557-574.

pertinent to the subject of marriage. The first is that of the tension between parental authority and individual choice. How, for example, are young Muslims in minority contexts, such as in America, negotiating their marriages in terms of their own preferences and their parents' authority over their spouse selection? (My approach to answering these questions is discussed below.) A point to discuss here is that of "importing brides," a popular preference among minority immigrants, in any society, of brides from their homeland for their sons. An issue related to this theme is that of the culture of the Muslim youth in minority settings, particularly when compared to the culture(s) in which their parents may have grown up. In the U.S., for example, children of Muslim immigrants have a culture that can be situated somewhere between an all-non-Muslim culture and an all-Muslim culture; the culture that these children appear to value seems to be a hybrid culture, often colliding with both their parents' as well as with the broader non-Muslim Western culture. Differences between the parents' native and the children's hybrid cultures includes notions of love and dating: while love marriages in many Muslim societies are deemed reprehensible, marriageable Muslims in non-Muslim contexts view dating as a necessary activity in the marriage process, without necessarily being physically or sexually involved with the potential partner.

The second theme is that of the perceived (un)availability of marriage partners, particularly for women, and how they respond to this dilemma. To what extent is it true, for example, that Muslim women in the West have extreme difficulties finding marriage partners, and believe that their only options are to either marry already-married men or marry non-Muslim men? Reports have emerged from Britain that show that, as Muslim women obtain higher education and as they grow older, their options for marriageable Muslim men narrow

considerably.<sup>3</sup> Although these reports are not conducted academically, I am interested in the discourse around them; how, for instance, do Muslims respond to such claims? Do Western Muslim women generally identify with these observations?

The third theme of significance is that of educated and career-oriented Muslim women. Do, for example, Muslim women who are well-educated and career-oriented—and possibly hence older than what many traditional Muslim communities expect brides to be, such as between the ages of 15 and 22—find it more difficult than younger and/or less career-minded Muslim females? I believe that, in the context of an American-Muslim setting, exploring this question should include a discussion also on the “Western” Muslim woman; these perceptions include those of Muslim males’ and of Muslim parents’. My interactions with Muslims who belong to immigrant families from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia suggest that they expect to marry “good Muslim girls.” Understandings of “good Muslim girls” vary significantly, although they tend to favor strict adherence to traditional, orthodox Islamic values of gender norms and rituals. The general expectation is that a virtuous woman will value and prioritize her family over her career and allow her husband to be the dominant, if not the only, bread-winner of the family; as will be shown below, however, the more education a female receives, the more likely she is to expect having a career—which typically does not suit well with the idea of “good Muslim woman.” Undeniably, however, it seems that Muslim women globally find it difficult to find marriage partners, especially if they give emphasis to their education and career,<sup>4</sup> which

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<sup>3</sup> "High-flying Muslim Career Women Willing to 'Share Husbands' Because of a Lack of Suitable Men," Daily Mail. March 11, 2012. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2113366/Muslim-women-share-husbands-lack-suitable-men.html#ixzz1oqGPcuyM>. Accessed September 12, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Abdul-Aal, Ghada (2010). I Want to Get Married!: One Wannabe Bride's Misadventures with Handsome Houdinis, Technicolor Grooms, Morality Police, and Other Mr. Not Quite Rights.* Austin: University of Texas at Austin.

takes us back to the idea of a “good Muslim woman or girl.”

My research questions thus include: how are marriage patterns and mate selections among Muslims in minority settings managed? When, and for which groups of Muslims, might it be considered necessary to create a narrative in order to legitimate a certain union, a narrative that will present the marriage as a respectable union that may not reflect truth? How are Muslim women looking for marriage making their interests in marriage known so that they may find suitable husbands? Do online matchmaking services appeal to Muslims, both women and men but especially women, during their spousal search? How do immigrant Muslim parents rationalize their preference for “a good girl from back home,” and how do their sons accept their rationales? Particularly in regards to Muslims in the West, what is the existing discourse on marriage among Muslim women—what are the issues that are addressed, how do women deal with the apparent lack of suitable partners, how do they respond to it, and how are both women and men responding to it? If there is indeed a lack of suitable Muslim men for Muslim women to marry, how do Muslim women understand their options? In particular, how is the standard prohibition on marriage to non-Muslim men perceived and negotiated? Lastly, what roles, if any, does “high” education and/or older age play in limiting, if at all, women’s prospects of being viewed as suitable for marriage?

To answer these questions, I rely on both secondary and primary literature, such as surveying how the Qur’an and *hadith* perceive of marriage or how they identify the ideal Muslim wife and husband. Ethnographic research conducted on Muslims in Europe, North America, and other countries and communities where there is a significant non-Muslim majority will be utilized as well. Active and popular online Muslim communities—such as [shiachat.com](http://shiachat.com), [afghanforums.com](http://afghanforums.com), [ummahforums.com](http://ummahforums.com), [aussiemuslims.com](http://aussiemuslims.com), [ummah.com](http://ummah.com), among numerous

others—are also useful in that some of the community members discuss their own experiences, feelings, and thoughts about relevant problems such as marriage; they also frequently provide responses to articles and blog posts on marriage.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter One, titled “The Muslim West,” serves as the demographic portion of the study. Here, I define what I mean by “the Muslim West,” which is to say that I use “Muslim West” to mean “Muslims in the West” because for many Muslims, the West *is* their home, and the cities and regions of the West in which they live thus should be identified as “Muslim West.” I then provide a demographic overview of the region the study covers, discussing also discuss general concerns of Muslims as minorities in the West; these concerns including maintaining one’s morality and faith in a non-Islamic environment, generational issues among (immigrant) Muslim parents and children, and the overall problem of finding the ideal marriage partner according to guidelines set by the Shari’a. I conclude with proposing that these issues are primarily Western Muslim issues.

Chapter Two, “Ideals of Marriage,” asks whether this problem of marriage is indeed a “problem,” and, if so, what makes it such. It briefly discusses the importance of marriage in Islam as understood from the Qur’an and *hadith*, and highlights the attributes of the ideal Muslim partner according to Islamic teachings (such as the Qur’an, *hadith*, and Qur’anic exegesis), to marriage manuals from the Muslim world—including Muslim blogs about and other social networking sites about marriage—which emphasize the role of parents and other elders in marriage, and, lastly, to contemporary Western Muslims. Chapter Three, entitled “Marriage and the Muslim Youth,” continues the discussion of the conflict of parental authority and individual

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<sup>5</sup> "High-flying Muslim career women willing to 'share husbands'." Ummah.com. Posted November 3, 2012. <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?320580-High-flying-Muslim-career-women-willing-to-share-husbands>.

choice in marriages in the Muslim West. Unraveling the notion of “culture versus Islam,” it surveys what problems the Muslim youth perceive before marriage, as discussed in some ethnographic studies; how likely are they, for instance, to marry someone of their parents’ choice or to accept their parents’ decision to deny them marriage to someone of a different race or ethnicity regardless of the potential partner’s religiosity or piety level? The chapter also discusses ideas about the Western Muslim woman according to other Muslims but particularly Muslim men and immigrant Muslim parents. What, for example, are the assumptions commonly held about Muslim women raised in the West, such as their ideas on gender roles in marriage, their attitudes towards being career women, and the average age at which they marry? I also survey here the different methods of mate selection and the different options they believe are available to them, such as online match-making, interracial marriages, interfaith marriages, polygamous marriages, single-hood, among others.

The study is intended to fill some of the existing lacunae regarding the subject of marriage among Muslims in the West. Relying significantly on ethnographic literature, the study notes that some of the literature, while discussing young American/British Muslims’ openness to marrying people outside of their race and culture, does not address the reality of this case—that is, when children do marry interracially, what happens? What sorts of struggles did they have to overcome, particularly with their families? Moreover, almost none of the participants in any of the studies/literature discuss inter-faith marriages among Muslims, even though some Imams and other religious authorities are starting to permit women to marry non-Muslim (Christian and Jewish) men in the West today.<sup>6</sup> The impression one gets from this lack of discussion on inter-

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<sup>6</sup> Rauf Abdul Feisal, *Moving the Mountain: Beyond Ground Zero to a New Vision of Islam in America* (New York, N.Y.: Free Press, 2012), 131.

faith marriages among Muslims where the wife is a Muslim is that marrying a non-Muslim is still not considered an option by most. Lastly, most of the sources I rely upon refer to generational conflicts, the tension between parental authority and children's preferences, and the idea of the "good Muslim wife" (but seldom the "good Muslim husband"), but none make it their focus, thereby providing the space for pursuing a study with these themes as the main focus.

## CHAPTER 1: The Muslim West

It is important to discuss what my use of the “Muslim West” hopes to achieve. I use it to mean Muslims in the West, or Western Muslims. This is because, despite the challenges that Muslims face while living in the West, it is a home to many. Just as we can say “Muslim Britain,” I propose we can say “the Muslim West,” by which is meant those parts of the West that contain strong Muslim populations. This is because the issues faced by Muslims in the West are very particular to them and are not often shared by Muslim communities outside of the West or, particularly, in Muslim-majority countries.

However, because Muslims are a minority in the West, one of their major concerns is maintaining Islam in a society that may be perceived as Islamophobic; this is the case particularly with immigrant Muslims, who commonly fear that not just their religion but their native cultures, too, are under threat in a non-Muslim-majority society. While being in the West is considered a threat to immigrant parents, the Western Muslim youth largely believe that being in the West enables them to study and practice Islam in a “more pure” way, in a way that is not polluted by “cultural” practices of their and/or their parents’ homelands, such as in South Asia or the Middle East. They are therefore more able to distinguish between “Islam” and “culture”—commonly written as “Islam versus Culture” or “Culture versus Islam,” as a random Google search reveals—a popular distinction among much of the Western Muslim youth today.<sup>7</sup>

However, this perception of the contrast between Islam and culture is generally perpetuated by the children of immigrant parents rather than by the parents themselves, possibly because the parents are far more connected to their native cultures than their children are, an observation that

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<sup>7</sup> Zareena Grewal, “Marriage in Colour: Race, Religion and Spouse Selection in Four American Mosques.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 2 (2009), 325.

contributes to the many generational and cultural gaps between Muslim immigrant parents and children.

It is in this context that the discussion of marriage and the issue of individual choice and parental authority, a major theme in the paper, become important. Immigrant parents are typically concerned with instilling a certain sense of piety and religiosity in their children's lives, in addition to ensuring that their children maintain their native cultural beliefs and traditions, and these parents recognize the role of marriage in connection to religion and culture: The ideal person for marriage, according to the parents, is usually someone who belongs to the family's native culture and also thus religion; this is because it is believed that an individual from the native culture is more pious and more traditional than diasporic individuals and can thus help ensure that both her/his partner and their children remain guided on the path of Islam and the parents' native culture. As will be shown below, Muslim females in the West are generally perceived as less religious, less traditional than their counterparts in non-Western, Muslim countries, and immigrant parents prefer to have their sons marry women who are more likely to be traditional and pious than not. Large numbers of Muslim men, too, view Western Muslim women similarly, adding that they set standards for their husbands that are too high, such as expecting them to help them in housework and otherwise partaking in "non-Islamic" gender roles.<sup>8</sup> Western Muslim women, however, as will be shown throughout this study, generally seek marriage partners who will respect their career choices, for those who work, and respect their understanding of gender roles. The age of marriage among Muslim women is also increasing,

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Sondos Kholoki-Kahf, "A Few Good Men? The Muslim American Woman's Dilemma." GOATMILK: An Intellectual Playground, ed. Wajahat Ali <http://goatmilkblog.com/2008/06/10/a-few-good-men-the-muslim-american-womans-dilemma/>. Last accessed April 20, 2013. The comments from the male respondents (as suggested by the name with which they publish their comments) in particular support this point.

such that, as they grow older, they find it difficult to find compatible Muslim partners for marriage. The disjuncture between parental expectations and individual choice, including both male and female preferences, frequently leads to transnational marriages, otherwise known as “bride importing,” since a transnational bride is preferred to one bred in the West.

The assumptions about the Western Muslim woman and Western Muslim women’s experiences contribute to the uniqueness of the problem of marriage among Western Muslims. Moreover, many immigrant parents in the West feel uncomfortable with their children choosing their spouses, whereas in their native countries, individual choice in spouse selection may be a culturally accepted practice.<sup>9</sup> This is due to the parents’ “frozen” values, or the values with which they left their native cultures; even as the values of the people inside their native culture change with time, the migrants feel unsettled about changing theirs. But the frozen values are not the only possible reason that individual choice is not appreciated in spousal selection, since other reasons include the fact that Muslim parents in Muslim countries do not typically have the fear that their children are being exposed to a non-Muslim culture and may thus not marry someone who is not as religiously-inclined as the parents might expect.

Below, I provide demographics of the Muslim West, emphasizing Muslim immigrant populations in general and South Asian immigrants in particular because South Asians are the largest group of immigrants in the United Kingdom and North America, the focus of this study.

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<sup>9</sup> Grewal, 340-341.

## 1. Demographics of the Muslim West

It is necessary to provide a demographic overview of the Muslim West before we proceed. This overview is to include ethnic distribution, approximate ages, and professions of the Muslims throughout the West.

### 1.1 Muslim Western Europe

The majority of the Muslim population in the United Kingdom lives in England and Wales<sup>10</sup> and amount to approximately 1.6 million total.<sup>11</sup> As of 2001, the United Kingdom census showed that 71.6% of the UK population identified as Christian and 2.7% of the population Muslim, while Hindus constituted 1%, Sikhs 0.6%, Jews 0.5%, and "other" 0.3%.<sup>12</sup> Of the 2.5% Muslim population, 68% was of South Asian origin, where Pakistanis alone account for 43% of the Muslim population as the dominant individual group in the UK. Indeed,

The characteristics of the British Muslim population are predominantly those of the Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian Muslim population living in Britain. This population is largely young and rural in origin. It is poor, badly housed and poorly educated, suffers high levels of male unemployment and has a very low female participation rate in the labour market.<sup>13</sup>

Because the largest group of Muslims in the UK and Wales is South Asian, this section will focus specifically on them. My focus on South Asian Muslims is also because much of the literature I reviewed for this study deals with South Asian Muslim experiences. However, the overall Muslim population in this region, however, also includes approximately 179,000 "white Muslims." According to the same census, 36,000 Muslims were born in North Africa and 93,000

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<sup>10</sup> Tahir Abbas, *Muslim Britain: Communities under Pressure* (London: Zed, 2005), 29.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Abbas, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 23.

in the Middle East; there were 96,000 Black African Muslims, of whom 7,500 are Nigerian-born and 11,000 of "other Central and Western African" countries.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the South Asian Muslim British population is "very religious" and "holds strong family values. Marriage is almost universal and is an intra-ethnic affair: 99 percent of Bangladeshi women in 1991 were married to Bangladeshi men, and 95 percent of Pakistani women to Pakistani men."<sup>15</sup> The source does not mention whether these endogamous or intra-ethnic marriages were conducted among first generation South Asians or other generations as well, nor how many of these cases were transnational marriages—that is, incidents of bride-importing or groom-importing.

Segregation between Muslims and the non-Muslim white population in the UK is also worth considering when discussing Muslim experiences in marriage and mate selection because it further supports the point of intra-ethnic marriages among British Muslims. Upholding close ties with their own communities, South Asian British Muslims in particular tend to segregate themselves from other ethnicities, especially whites:

Within the urban areas in which they have settled, Pakistanis and (particularly) Bangladeshis have shown high rates of segregation. On a scale from 0 (no segregation) to 100 (complete segregation), Pakistanis segregated from whites averaged 54 while Bangladeshis averaged 65. Bangladeshis showed the highest degree of segregation of any ethnic population in Britain in the 1991 census.... Thus, even though Pakistanis and Bangladeshis share a religion and once shared a nationality, ethnicity appears to be a stronger bond than religion among these Muslims.<sup>16</sup>

This apparently self-imposed segregation contributes to the reason that Bangladeshis and Pakistanis have a stronger tendency than other ethnic groups to intermarry. This point is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 20-23.

<sup>15</sup> Abbas, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 28.

important to this study for two main reasons. First, it reduces the feasibility of interracial marriages among British Muslims, be it marriage with native British or with Muslims of other ethnicities and races, such as between Pakistanis and Bengalis. Second, it helps demonstrate the importance of culture and ethnicity in marriages. It does not matter, for example, that a marriage may take place between a Pakistani and a Bengali Muslim couple; what matter is that the marriage took place between a Pakistani and a Bengali—or two people of different countries. The operative difference, thus, is in the ethnic or national difference despite the subjects' having the same religion.

It is also worthwhile to consider the socioeconomic status of the Muslims in Britain because it shapes human experiences and standards. People's socio-economic status can suggest other information about them, such as, perhaps, why they migrated in the first place, and can also, to a certain extent, predict the future of their children and other descendants if they are to settle in the adopted country. Additionally, depending on which family members work and bring in the most income, the status can also indicate what their cultural and religious expectations are. For example, the fewer wage-earning females in a specific family, the more likely it is that the family upholds traditional South Asian and/or Muslim beliefs about a lack of appreciation for working women or mingling with members of the opposite gender.

In terms of their socio-economic status, then, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis "represent some of the poorest minority ethnic populations in Britain," as the majority of "both groups originate from peasant backgrounds."<sup>17</sup> Bangladeshis and Pakistanis have the lowest percentages of all ethnic groups in higher managerial professions (2.1 and 3.6 respectively, compared to 6.1

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<sup>17</sup> Abbas, 29.

for the population as a whole). Moreover, only 22% of Bangladeshi women aged 16 and over and 27% of Pakistani women in the same category were economically active, the census revealed.<sup>18</sup> Overall, too, Muslims as a whole "occupy an underprivileged position," according to the 2001 British census, with only 13% of the working Muslim population in the three white-collar classes (that is, higher managerial and professional occupations, lower managerial and professional occupations, and intermediate occupations), compared to 26% of the total working population of England and Wales and 30% of the Hindu population and 21% of the Sikh population.<sup>19</sup> This "low participation rate of Muslims, and of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis compared to Indian women, reflects traditional Islamic values of *purdah* (protecting Muslim women from contact with men outside their immediate family) and *izzet* (family honour)."<sup>20</sup> This last statistic and the point regarding *purdah* and *izzet* suggest that religion plays a more important role in values regarding gender roles than does culture—that is, that the Muslims of India, for example, understand gender roles differently than do the Hindus of India because of their different religions and despite their similar cultural backgrounds. However, I would propose that the reason that gender roles are perceived differently in each religious group is not due so much to their members' religious beliefs but more to the amount of time they have spent in the host land. First-generation Pakistani Muslims, for example, are more likely to have similar beliefs and attitudes towards gender and other issues as first-generation Hindu immigrants, as opposed to second- or third-generation Pakistani Muslims. After all, Muslims and Hindus in South Asia perceive many issues similarly, including women's roles and rights. For instance, the dowry, or the gift given to the groom or his family by the bride's family, is a shared custom among South

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 30

Asian Muslims, Hindus, and other religious groups,<sup>21</sup> even though Islam sanctions *mahr*, or the dowry, which is gift given to the bride by the groom. That the Muslim population in focus here is generally doing unsatisfactorily can therefore be attributed to their native cultural understandings of gender roles, which maintain that only men should be the breadwinners of the family while the women, typically, stay at home, leading to the family's economic unrest in a society where more than one income is the norm.<sup>22</sup>

### *Muslim Germany*

As of 2009, there are an estimated 3.8 to 4.3 million Muslims in Germany, which is about 4.6-5.2% of the total population.<sup>23</sup> With a small number of German converts to Islam and an immigration Muslim population with origins from over forty-nine different Muslim countries, a majority of the German Muslim population are of Turkish origin (63%), followed by Eastern Europeans (14%) and Middle Eastern Muslims (8%).<sup>24</sup>

Although it is difficult to measure a person's level of piety, adherence to certain beliefs and practices may be a means of determining how religious a person is. Statistics that compare Muslims' adherence to common Islamic practices such as fasting and prayer in Germany to those in the United States indicate that German Muslims are "far more" religious than the average population. In Germany, for example, 90% Muslim are characterized by "deep religiosity," including 41% of "highly religious" individuals and 5% "not religious."<sup>25</sup> Additionally, in the

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<sup>21</sup> Mohd Umar, *Bride Burning in India: A Socio Legal Study* (New Delhi: A.P.H. Pub.:1998), 73.

<sup>22</sup> "Families Need 36,800 to Live Acceptably, Study Says." BBC News. July 10, 2012. Accessed April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18770783>.

<sup>23</sup> Tara Bahrapour *et al*, "The Many Sides of Muslim Integration: A German-American Comparison." *American Institute for Contemporary German Studies*. Last accessed April 20, 2013. <http://www.aicgs.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/germanamerican13.pdf>, 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

same country, 58% of Muslims do not drink alcohol, 39% pray at least once a day, 30% wear the hijab, and 34% visit the mosque regularly.<sup>26</sup> In both Germany and the U.S., over 80% of Muslims state that religion is very important to them, 70% give *zakat*, and 70% fast during Ramadhan.<sup>27</sup> Level of religiosity is arguably determinative of its preferences and expectations in mate selection: the more religious a group is, the more likely it is raise its standards of mate selection such that its members' options become limited.

Since a majority of the Muslim population in Germany, as in much of the West, is first- or second-generation Muslims, it is also important to discuss their reasons of migration in order to determine what their mate selection standards might be. Approximately 24% of Muslims immigrated to Germany because of economic reasons, around 20% due to conflict, 14.8% due to education, and 24% family reunion reasons.<sup>28</sup> The level of education achieved by foreign-born immigrants is an important indication of the socioeconomic resources and backgrounds a migrant group brings with it—resources that often determine the migrant group's starting position in the host country.<sup>29</sup> In Germany, Turkish migrants, Muslim or not, "fare relatively badly when compared to immigrants from southeastern Europe or to immigrants from other Muslim countries of origin. 25.5% of Germany's Muslims have no school degree, 26.3% a very low school degree, and 36.2% have at least a high school degree.<sup>30</sup> It is particularly the first-wave of immigrant generations from Turkey or southeastern Europe that has very poor education figures: only 20.4% of these Turkish immigrants have a high school diploma, compared to 63.3% Central

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 20.

Asian and 56% Middle Eastern Muslims.<sup>31</sup> 37.5% of German Muslims evaluate their financial situation as "excellent" or "good" and 62.5% as "fair" or "poor."<sup>32</sup> Approximately 63% of native German women work, compared to 43% of immigrant Muslim women.<sup>33</sup> These statistics insinuate that gendered expectations, such as those of men as financial providers for their families, remain the same among immigrants even as they migrate to their host country.

How the members of a Muslim population fare in their host country is determined by their socio-economic status as well as, it seems, by their understanding of gender roles. For example, because a large percentage of immigrant Muslim women do not contribute to the family's income, primarily because of their understanding that women do not need to work, it is not surprising that their families would not be doing well financially, although many other factors might contribute to the reasons that women do not work as well. Based specifically on their attitude towards women's education and financial contributions to the family, which can be attributed to their cultural expectations of women, it can be presumed that these immigrants' understanding of marriage, attitude towards different modes of mate selection, and gendered expectations would be similar to, if not the same as, those in their native countries.

## **1.2 Muslim Australia and New Zealand**

Muslims in Australia and New Zealand remain a small minority. In 2006, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Australia had approximately 340,392 Muslims, or 1.7% of the total population; other sources claim that the Australian Muslim population is over half a

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 24.

million.<sup>34</sup> New Zealand houses less than 1% of Muslims—either 35,973 or 40-45,000.<sup>35</sup> The Australian-born Muslims form the largest group of Muslims in the country, with 37.8% of the total Australian Muslim population, followed by Lebanese-born (8.8%) and Turkish-born Muslims.<sup>36</sup> The situation differs in New Zealand, where unofficial records claim that Muslims of South Asian origin are the dominant group, and New Zealand-born Muslims form a smaller group than immigrants.<sup>37</sup> In 1996, 2001, and 2006, unemployment rates among Australian Muslims were three times higher than the national total.<sup>38</sup> These statistics, showing that the majority of the Muslims in the region are immigrants, also hint to the idea that they are not well assimilated in their adopted countries since the censuses consistently note that the Muslim population is largely unemployed and therefore presumably not financially empowered—which makes their socio-economic status lower than the average population.

As discussed in previous sections, there is a strong link between citizenship status (i.e., native or immigrant), socio-economic status, and marriage ideals. These factors also help determine level of religiosity and understanding of Islamic ideals of marriage. In Australia, many young Muslims “voluntarily return to their parents’ home country to seek a suitable spouse with the assistance of family members who live there” because it “is not always possible to find a spouse in Australia who is acceptable to both the potential bride (or bridegroom) and their parents.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, that the partner must be suitable not just according to the individual getting

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<sup>34</sup> Erich Kolig and Nahid Kabir, “Not Friend, Not Foe: The Rocky Road of Enfranchisement of Muslims into Multicultural Nationhood in Australia and New Zealand.” *Immigrant & Minorities* 26, no. 3 (2008): 269. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02619280802528502>.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>39</sup> Jamila Hussain, “Family Law and Muslim Communities” in *Muslim Communities in Australia*. Ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (Sydney: UNSW, 2001), 166.

but also to her/his parents suggests that the requirements for mate selection are rather high and strict. That marriage-minded Muslims are to find their partners overseas, too, implies that there is little interest in marrying Western-born Muslims, which is possibly due to parental expectations more than to the individual expectations of the couple involved. The difficulty Australian Muslims face in finding compatible marriage partners may be a consequence also of these Muslims' understanding of marriage; arranged marriages and marriages to individuals from the parents' homeland are, after all, common among Australian-born Muslims; these marriages are "frequently arranged by relatives overseas and the prospective bride and groom may never have met in person," although they may have communicated in other ways, such as the telephone.<sup>40</sup>

While there is a dearth of studies on Muslims in New Zealand and their experiences particularly with marriage, Australian Muslims seem to share the experiences and concerns of Muslims throughout the rest of the Muslim West. The statistics provided above indirectly show that Australian Muslims' concerns and experiences, and possibly their understanding of Islam, lead them to seek marriage partners in their or their parents' homeland rather than in the host country. For these Muslims, as for many other immigrant Western Muslims, the solution to the problem of a lack of suitable husbands in the West seems to be transnational marriages.

### **1.3 Muslim North America**

As with the Western Muslims in the regions discussed previously, citizenship status, socio-economic status, the level of religiosity, and gender dynamics are interconnected themes that may help explain how marriage relations work. It has been claimed that around 77% of Muslims

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<sup>40</sup> Hussain, 168.

in America are naturalized as opposed to natives to being native to or born in this country.<sup>41</sup> The majority of foreign-born Muslims arrived in the U.S. either in the 1990s (33%) or in the 2000s (28%).<sup>42</sup> Of these Muslims, 24% migrated to the U.S. because of economic reasons, 20% due to conflict, and 26% due to education.<sup>43</sup> Reasons of migration are essential to understanding how family dynamics and gender roles work, and their understandings of gender roles, such as of working women, play a role in their overall socio-economic status. This claim is supported by the facts that approximately 59% of American Muslim women work<sup>44</sup> and that 42% of American Muslims evaluate their financial situation as excellent or good, and 52% "fair" or "poor."<sup>45</sup> American Muslims appear to be doing relatively well, especially compared to other Americans. For example, 32.1% of American Muslims have advanced degrees, compared to 8.6% of the total American population.<sup>46</sup> 12% American Muslims are of Arab origins, 24% of South Asian background, and 42% are African Americans.<sup>47</sup>

Muslim demographics in Canada are divided as follows: Among Canadian Muslims, 37% are of South Asian descent, and most of these are from India or Pakistan.<sup>48</sup> Arab immigrants comprise of 21% and Caribbean Muslims 14%.<sup>49</sup> Overall, Muslims make up 2% of the total population of Canada. As in America, the Muslims of Canada are also more educated compared to the overall population of Canada: one in three adult Muslim women in Canada has

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<sup>41</sup> Bahrapour *et al*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Negin Ghaffari, *Beyond 9/11: American Muslim Youth Transcending Pedagogies of Stigma to Resilience* (Proquest, Umi Dissertatio, 2011), 49.

<sup>47</sup> Ghaffari, 52.

<sup>48</sup> Florian Pohl, *Modern Muslim Societies* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Reference, 2011), 361.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 361.

postsecondary education, compared to one in five Canadian women overall.<sup>50</sup> Importantly, Muslims are the youngest social group in Canada, with a median age of 28.1 years, compared to the national median age of 40.4 years.<sup>51</sup> This is significant to the discussion marriage, specifically, since their median age is a popular age of marriage. With many of them most likely seeking to get married, for instance, how do they evaluate their options, and what are their standards in mate selection?

Overall Muslims in North America are reportedly more well off financially and otherwise than Muslims in the rest of the West, which, although available studies do not discuss, begs the question of how exactly marriages are conducted among North American Muslims. With the majority as immigrants or children of immigrants, it can be imagined that they are largely transnational—but this would be the case generally with younger Muslims and not with those who are traditionally considered “older,” such as over the age of 25. As the findings of this thesis will show below, as young Muslims grow older, they are afforded more personal choice in selecting their partner, and they do not seem to accept transnational marriages as an acceptable option for themselves.

#### **1.4 Assessing the “Western” and “Muslim” Dilemma**

The relationship between Islam (and/or Muslims) and the West has been a critical subject of discussion for the last several decades. Often, “Islam”/“Muslims” and “the West” are contrasted against each other, and it is implied that the ideologies of “Islam” and “the West” or the identities of “Muslim” and “Western” are mutually exclusive. As Michael Humphrey writes,

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<sup>50</sup> Katherine Bullock, "Toward a Framework for Investigating Muslim Women and Political Engagement in Canada," in *Islam in the Hinterlands: Muslim Cultural Politics in Canada*, ed. Jasmine Zine, ed. (Vancouver: UBC, 2012), 94.

<sup>51</sup> Pohl, 361.

The formulation 'Islam in the West' suggests an encounter between two incompatible and homogenising cultures, one religious and the other secular. From the perspective of the West, the Islamic presence produced through immigration is represented as a test case for the future of secular nation-state. Thus in Australia, Islam is seen as a problem for 'multiculturalism' while in France, 'Islam' is seen as an obstacle to national secularism.<sup>52</sup>

This statement points out that Islam is not only perceived differently by different Western countries but that this perception of Islam leads to different experiences by the Muslims in their respective Western countries. This is to say, the experiences of North American Muslims might not be the same as those of Western European Muslims, which would be different from those of Australian Muslims.

Nonetheless, the West itself sees Islam and Muslims as a problem or threat of some sort, as Humphrey writes, and immigrant Western Muslims in turn see the West and their immersion into Western societies as a threat to their native cultures and Islam as well. If it is not a threat to Islam, then it is a threat at least to a more complete and more preferred way of practicing Islam in the way they believe to be ideal. In Muslim countries, for example, every community, or every region of a Muslim country, has its own set standards and traditions of gender interactions, such that in some Muslim communities, gender segregation is practiced strictly while not as much, or at all, in others. For Muslim immigrants coming from a community that strictly adheres to gender segregation, then, the Western world and its more tolerant attitude towards gender-mixing can pose challenges; in such a case, because many Muslims believe that gender-mixing is forbidden in Islam, to witness it and not challenge it or to participate in it is to commit a sin. Moreover, in the Muslim world, one can hear the *adhaan*, or the call to prayer, conveniently to

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Humphrey, "An Australian Islam? Religion in the Multicultural City," in *Muslim Communities in Australia*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh and Abdullah Saeed, 33.

be reminder about each of the daily prayers, and, with the community or the nation practicing Islam in a similar way, one does not often feel uncomfortable expressing one's identity as a Muslim or practicing Islam the way one or one's community understands it. As a Muslim blogger puts it, in the West, one has to "respond to the obligations with [one's] own free will."<sup>53</sup> He goes on to add, while discussing his early experiences as a Muslim immigrant in the West, "In Islamic countries, the *adhan* which goes off five times a day reminds a Muslim to 'rush towards success' no matter what they are doing. But I was in a place, all by myself, with no practicing Muslims around, trying to get by and stick with the principles of my Deen [religion]." As he also puts it, the West allows Muslims to practice Islam but it "hardly encourage[s] it."<sup>54</sup> In simpler terms, the Western world is not the ideal place for many Muslims in terms of how difficult it can be to practice Islam, but a large number of those who come here as refugees or asylum seekers or for reasons due to work or a more comfortable lifestyle feel compelled to be here; it is often a better alternative for them compared to their native countries.

The perceived influence that the West or Western cultures may have on Muslims who migrate to the West is therefore not an unknown fear to Muslims. In an online article titled "Losing Identity: Dissolving in Others," the unknown author writes,<sup>55</sup> "The influence of the western environment is quite obvious in their [the Western Muslims'] case, especially among the youth who have been born, brought up and educated in the west. This phenomenon is an

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<sup>53</sup> Yaf, June 19, 2011. "My Experience Being a Muslim in the West," *Islamic Experiences Blog*, <http://www.islamicexperiences.com/2011/06/my-experience-being-muslim-in-west.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> This article appears on many Muslim websites and forums, sometimes titled "Hold Fast the Scripture and Muslims' Position Towards Western Civilization," attributed to an Ahmad 'Abd al-Rahmaan al-Swiyaan, as noted in <http://www.paklinks.com/gs/religion-and-scripture/43632-hold-fast-the-scripture-and-muslima-s-position-towards-western-civilization.html#post538614>.

expected result which does not need to be examined, researched or proven.”<sup>56</sup> He offers the example of the hijab’s being manipulated as a fashion statement among Western Muslim women,<sup>57</sup> rather than as a mark of their piety, modesty, and submission to God—although this happens in Muslim countries, too.<sup>58</sup> The author goes on to criticize the common contemporary practice of wearing the *hijab* only on the head, sometimes fashionably enough for it to become more of a fashion statement than an expression of one’s modesty and piety. The author notes,

It is simply a form of fashion, and is now a days just a simple cloth that covers part of the hair, accompanied by the wearing of tight pants and wearing all kinds of adornments and perfumes. Mixing, shaking hands with non-mahrams [men whom Muslim women may marry and are thus not allowed to interact with freely], talking to them carelessly and freely are matters that have become ordinary, an everyday thing.<sup>59</sup>

Interestingly, he seems to be familiar with the political role of the hijab and the fact that this form of hijab is a product of the circumstances that Muslims face in the West. He says, then,

If anybody speaks out against such things [e.g., the hijab as a form of fashion, women's tight clothing, gender mixing, men and women shaking hands], they will quickly be accused of being fanatical and extremist, and of being ignorant of the realities of life in the west and the social circumstances in which people live. He will be told that he is looking at America or Europe through the eyes of a simple Bedouin who has no understanding or insight.<sup>60</sup>

Another example of Western influence that he provides is that of gender mixing, or at least feeling ashamed of segregating women and men at events, criticizing those Muslims who feel apologetic about the practice and agree with those who dismiss it as an “intellectual backward”

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<sup>56</sup> Asiya, "Hold Fast to the Scripture." April 15, 2010. Muslim Forum. Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/loseidentity.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2011), 213.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>59</sup> Asiya, “Hold Fast to the Scripture.”

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

practice.

That Muslims are vulnerable to Western influence, as regretted by the Muslim quoted above, is also reflected in other Muslims' statements: "[We] need to reduce the Western influence on our kids. The Australian kids take drugs, drink alcohol, and have unlawful sex relationships. We would not like our Muslim kids to be influenced by this corrupt society."<sup>61</sup> Yet, the issue is much deeper than "Western influence": a majority of Western Muslims, as immigrants or children of immigrants, have strong connections with Muslim cultures in the Muslim world; their children and grandchildren are stuck between having to reconcile those traditions of theirs that are not easily maintained or practiced in the West. For example, author Asma Gul Hassan writes,

As a young woman who has grown up in America, I'm not willingly going to consent to an 'old world' arranged marriage like my mother had. At the same time, I know as a Muslim and Pakistani, that I'm certainly not free to date, meet (and probably have sex with) men. So how do I marry if I don't intend on having arranged marriage, yet I'm not ready to turn my back on cultural and religious standards against dating?<sup>62</sup>

She also describes the problem of gender segregation, widely considered an Islamic tradition and not just a Muslim tradition, and the encouragement to marry early: it is often not practical to expect to practice gender segregation whenever necessary, and early marriages generally limit women's options in pursuing higher education and careers of their choice. Moreover, early marriages also commonly lead to unhappiness in the marriage and eventually divorce: as a male interviewee in Hassan's study says, "Most (but not all) of the sexual-urge-hastened marriages that I've seen have broken up miserably in 1 to 3 years, or are mired in despair and

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<sup>61</sup> Samina Yasmeen and Salma Al-Khudairi, *A Gender Based Need Assessment Study of Muslims Living in Perth Metropolitan Area*, A report submitted to the Australian Department of Immigration (University of Western Australia, Perth 1998), 12.

<sup>62</sup> Asma Gull Hassan, *American Muslims: The New Generation* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 136.

miscommunication," and the respondent is "concerned for older Muslim women who were not meeting nice Muslim men because the communities are often segregated."<sup>63</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Since a majority of the Muslims of the Muslim West are immigrants, it is not surprising that they bring the traditions of their native homelands with them. This is where the problem of individual choice and parental authority, as a major theme of this study, becomes significant: while the children, many of whom are either born or raised in the West, understand marriage one way—similar to Western ideas of marriage, such as valuing companionate marriages—their parents understand it another way, such as by valuing traditional arranged (and sometimes forced) marriages instead. With South Asians being the largest immigrant Muslim population in much of the West, it is important to bear in the mind how South Asians traditionally conduct their marriages and how that might affect their expectations in North America. Modes of mate selection also differ in Western societies from those in traditional Muslim societies. Western societies, for example, do not find intermingling of the genders a problem, and they seem relatively more open to the idea of various methods of mate selection, such as internet matchmaking services; Muslim societies, however, generally find mixing of the genders reprehensible and prefer traditional arranged marriages and afford the family authority in whom children marry. It is therefore worth evaluating how marriages work among the members of the generation of Western Muslims who find themselves in an “in-between” culture, a culture that neither completely resembles their parents’ native culture nor is entirely Western.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 136.

## **CHAPTER 2: Muslim Marriage Ideals and the Unavailable Suitable Spouse**

In this chapter, I will first evaluate the importance of marriage in Islam to explain what makes the issue of marriage among Western Muslims a problem in the first place. I will then appeal to the Qur'an and Qur'anic commentaries on marriage and the ideal and preferred partner for Muslim women and Muslim men. Because marriage manuals are given immense value in South Asian cultures and because South Asians are located in the West in large numbers, I will also discuss these manuals' teachings on marriage and the ideal partner. In the discussion of the ideal spouse, an important point to be made is that of individual choice and parental authority: how much authority can the individual partners and their elders, parents, or other guardians enjoy in whom they marry? Moreover, how much does parental choice make someone ideal who might otherwise not be considered ideal? It seems that it is not simply parental choices as opposed to individual choice but also parental choice *as* religious ideal. However, this will be discussed only briefly in this chapter. My sources on marriage ideals among Western Muslims include not just the Qur'an and traditional (e.g., classical) exegesis, but also contemporary discussions among Muslim scholars and activists as well as ordinary Muslims. Online Muslim discussion forums, popular blogs, and internet articles and blogs on Muslim marriages, for example, all offer rich information about what Muslims consider to be the most and least preferred qualities in potential partners. In some online communities, when discussions of marital roles and relations arise—which do so rather frequently—the responses of some of the members are worth noting, as they, too, provide ample room for discussions on the ideal Muslim partner according to Muslims. While ethnographic studies on discussion on Muslim marriages are rare, there are some studies that analyze how Muslim marital ads work, how they are framed, and what attributes different Muslims—or at least their parents—expect in potential spouses.

## 2.1 Marriage in Islam

It is well known that Islam looks favorably towards marriage and encourages it for both women and men, while discouraging celibacy, if not prohibiting it. Muslims generally understand marriage to be a *sunnah*, which means that it is encouraged but not obligatory, as the discussion on a Muslim forum called SunniForum.com shows.<sup>64</sup> Other Muslims and some authorities, however, believe that marriage is obligatory because of a hadith, or a prophetic statement, that “Marriage is my sunna. Whosoever keeps away from it is not from me.”<sup>65</sup> Without marriage, according to another hadith, one’s faith is incomplete, as marriage is half of one’s religion.<sup>66</sup> But marriage itself comes with certain guidelines, and a Muslim must follow the guidelines established by Islamic moral law. According to tradition, for example, Muslim men are encouraged to marry Muslim women but can also marry the women of the People of the Book (Christians and Jews); for women, the law states that only marriage to Muslim men is legal, and marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, whether the latter are from among the People of the Book or not, are invalid. The ideal husband for a Muslim woman, then, is a Muslim man, and the ideal wife for a Muslim man is a Muslim woman. The majority of Muslims believe this to be a divine injunction, but this is not to claim that marriages among Muslim women and non-Muslim men do not take place. For example, marriage among Muslim women and Hindu men are not uncommon in India, where Muslims are approximately 14% of the total population and are therefore a minority against a majority Hindu population: As Akbar Ahmed writes, “While Muslim men married Hindu women when they were dominant [in India], today the

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<sup>64</sup> Shafiqah, "Is marriage compulsory in Islam?" September 28, 2008. Muslim Forum. Accessed March 23, 2013. <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?38505-Is-marriage-compulsory-in-Islam>.

<sup>65</sup> Shaykh Muhammad S. Al-Munajjid, "Ruling on One Who Forbids Marriage for Himself." Islam Question & Answer. Fatwa Number 87998. Accessed April 12, 2013. <http://islamqa.info/en/ref/87998>.

<sup>66</sup> Narrated by Anas ibn Malik, in al-Tirmidhi, hadith number 3096: Allah’s Messenger (peace be upon him) said, "When a man marries he has fulfilled half of the religion; so let him fear Allah regarding the remaining half."

picture is reversed, with large numbers of Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men in India..."<sup>67</sup> Moreover, some contemporary Muslim scholars and imams, or community leaders, are contesting the traditional argument against marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, and are arguing for Muslim women's right to marry Christians and Jews in the West, as will be discussed below in Section 2.5.

The importance of marriage in Islam is therefore uncontested, although whether most Muslims marry because Islam encourages them to or because they choose to do so out of personal reasons is unclear. The importance that Islam gives to marriage contributes to what I identify as a problem of marriage among Western Muslims, because there is an impetus to marry but a lack of available partners. Those seeking partners *want* to get married, and some of them understand it to be a religious obligation, but there is no one that they believe they *can* marry. This is so especially in the case of Western Muslim women because of the problem of compatibility: as I show below, Western Muslim women generally find that their Muslim male counterparts expect wives who will uphold traditional gender roles, such as not working and staying at home; the women are also generally older than the men seeking wives, which furthers the dilemma of available suitable husbands for the women. This problem is, as discussed in Chapter One, one of many faced by Muslims in Western and minority contexts.

In this chapter, I first address marriage-related verses from the Qur'an, offering also their exegesis and contemporary responses to them. The purpose of this discussion is to explain the importance of marriage as understood through the Qur'an, including whom a Muslim can or cannot marry and the context in which they were revealed. I examine the Arabic word *kuf*,

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<sup>67</sup> Akbar Ahmed, *Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin* (London: Routledge, 1997), 52.

which means compatibility or equality, particular in terms of marriage, to argue that the Qur'an advocates marriages in which the couples are compatible with each other. Then, I discuss the ideal partner according to contemporary Western Muslims as can be gleaned from their conversations online, such as in blogs, articles, and discussion forums. I then provide ample evidence that Muslim women are struggling to find husbands, due to the expectations that they and Muslim men have of their potential spouse as well as of the assumptions and conclusions that the two genders make about each other. This paves way for the discussion on the possible options that Muslim women might have in getting married, such as marrying men from the People of the Book, a right not denied by the Qur'an. I highlight interreligious marriages as a feasible and necessary option, if solution, to the dilemma of the lack of available husbands for Western Muslim women.

### *Marriage in the Qur'an*

The Qur'an provides several purposes of marriage. Verse 4:1, for example, reads, "O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women." Since pre-marital sexual relations are prohibited in Islam, Qur'anic verse 4:1 can be read to mean that marriage is the most acceptable way for the continuation of the human race. This purpose is also mirrored in another verse, which reads, "Your women are a tilth for you (to cultivate) so go to your tilth as ye will, and send (good deeds) before you for your souls, and fear Allah, and know that ye will (one day) meet Him" (2:223). Because the verse compares a woman to a tilth, which is soil that is suitable for crop growth, and because "good seeds" (i.e., offspring) can be "planted" in the

wife only through the front position, as al-Wahidi and other commentators note,<sup>68</sup> it has been traditionally interpreted to mean that intercourse in any position so long as it is through the vagina is permissible. At least one purpose of marriage, then, is for the couple to have children in an Islamically acceptable way. While 2:223 may imply that a Muslim wife (or couple) necessarily has to have children, no Qur’anic verse makes it explicitly obligatory for the couple or the wife to bear children<sup>69</sup>—although the ideal wife may be one who can indeed be compared to a “tilth” who can produce (Muslim) children. Importantly, another purpose the Qur’an seems to give to marriage is that wives and husbands are garments [*libās*] for each other: “Permitted for you, during the night of the fast, that you approach your wives. They are your garments, and you are their garments” (2:187). “Garments” here is commonly understood, both by exegetes and ordinary Muslims, as metaphorical clothing for each other that are a necessity for each other and that complete and complement each other. As Yasir Qadhi, an influential teacher at Al-Maghrib Institute whose teachings appear on many Muslim forums online, adds, “Clothes are the closest thing to one’s body. Nothing comes between a person and his or her clothes. So the analogy of spouses being ‘like clothes to one another’ implies such a closeness – there is nothing, literally and metaphorically, that should come between spouses.”<sup>70</sup> Another role of marriage, then, is to provide companionship for the spouses, to make the couple feel complete with each other. This is also attested by other verses: “And of His signs is this: He created for you helpmeets from yourselves that ye might find rest in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Lo!

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<sup>68</sup> “*Asbab Al-Nuzul* by Al-Wahidi,” trans. Mokrane Geuzzou. The *Tafsirs* (Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought: Jordan, 2012). Accessed March 7, 2013.  
<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=86&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=223&tDisplay=yes&Page=1&Size=1&LanguageId=2>.

<sup>69</sup> Mohamad Ashrof, *Islam and Gender Justice: Questions at the Interface* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publ., 2005), 190.

<sup>70</sup> Yasir Qadhi, “Like a Garment.” Islam House. February 2011. Accessed February 3, 2013.

[http://d1.islamhouse.com/data/en/ih\\_books/single/en\\_Like\\_A\\_Garment.pdf](http://d1.islamhouse.com/data/en/ih_books/single/en_Like_A_Garment.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> *Sahih Bukhari*, 3:129.

herein indeed are portents for folk who reflect” (30:21) and “And Allah hath given you [mates] of your own kind, and hath given you, from your [mates], sons and grandsons, and hath made provision of good things for you” (16:72).

Lastly, the Qur’an notes that marriage can serve as a means of self-restraint, at least for men: “And let those who cannot find a match keep chaste till Allah give them independence by His grace” (24:33). Since sexual relations are acceptable in Islam only within a valid marriage, a conclusion that can be made from 24:33 is that once married, the person would be able to satisfy her/himself sexually within a legal marriage. This conclusion is affirmed by the hadith that “He who can afford to marry should marry, because it will help him refrain from looking at other women, and save his private parts from committing illegal sexual relation; and he who cannot afford to marry is advised to fast, as fasting will diminish his sexual power.”<sup>71</sup> Marriage, thus, legitimates sexual intercourse and other intimate relations between people married to each other.

Although the Qur’an certainly promotes marriage and regards it in high esteem, it deems certain marriage unions impermissible. For example, it prohibits marriage between Muslims (both women and men) and the *mushrikeen*, a word that may be translated as idolaters or polytheists; the word is also sometimes translated as disbelieving, non-believing, or un-believing, as the Qur’an views disbelief in the oneness of God as outright disbelief.<sup>72</sup> According to verse 2:221,

Wed not idolatresses till they believe; for lo! a believing bondwoman is better than an idolatress though she please you; and give not your daughters in marriage to idolaters till they believe, for lo! a believing slave is better than an idolater

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<sup>71</sup> Bukhari, 3:129.

<sup>72</sup> The Qur’an’s relationship with Christians and Jews (People of the Book) is complicated, and it is difficult to determine whether they are indeed considered *mushrik* (polytheist) or *kafir* (disbelievers) or not; however, verse 9:28-33 does point out that those Christians who believe that Jesus is the son of God are *mushrik* as are those among the Jews who believe that Uzair is the son of God.

though he please you. These invite unto the Fire, and Allah inviteth unto the Garden, and unto forgiveness by His grace, and expoundeth His revelations to mankind that haply they may remember.<sup>73</sup>

The verse applies to both women and men, although its direct audience seems to be men alone, who are told neither to marry disbelieving women themselves nor marry their women (or “daughters,” according to Pickthall) to disbelieving men. The reason given in the verse is that the disbelievers “invite you to the fire,” whereas a Muslim, believing spouse would help guide one towards God or Islam. Marriage is thus not simply about material or worldly bliss or companionship, but, if the verse is interpreted literally, one’s spousal choice may determine one’s eschatological fate. According to Ibn ‘Abbas (d. 687), the Prophet’s paternal cousin and an acknowledged expert on Qur’anic exegesis, the verse was revealed in response to Marthad Ibn Abi Marthad Al-Ghanawi’s desire to marry an idolatress woman, named ‘Inaq, who was his mistress prior to his conversion to Islam.<sup>74</sup> The ruling issued here is that men should neither themselves marry idolatresses nor allow the women under their care to marry—or be married to—idolaters, until the idolaters in both cases accept belief in God. It is better, the verse and the commentary say, to marry a slave than to marry a free non-believing person.

‘Ali ibn Ahmed al-Wahidi (d. 1075) in his *Kitāb Asbāb al-Nuzūl (The Book of Occasions of Revelation)* corroborates Ibn ‘Abbas’s story but offers another context as well: the verse was revealed to address ‘Abd Allah ibn Rawahah’s marriage to his black slavewoman whom he punched and felt guilty afterwards. He went to the Prophet to share his guilt with him, and the latter helped the former realize that the slavewoman whom he had hit was a believer. Ibn

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<sup>73</sup> This study uses Pickthall’s translation, unless otherwise noted. All the translations are obtained from here: <http://www.islamawakened.com/quran/2/221/default.htm>.

<sup>74</sup> “*Tafsir Ibn ‘Abbas*,” trans. Mokrane Geuzzou. *The Tafsirs* (Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought: Jordan, 2012). Accessed March 7, 2013. <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=221&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

Rawahah then decided to set her free and marry her, an act that was condemned by the Muslim community. In response to their condemnation, God revealed verse 2:221 to inform the community that Ibn Rawahah had in fact committed a virtuous deed by marrying a slave woman instead of a free unbelieving woman. The community's disapproval, al-Wahidi adds by authority of Ibn 'Abbas adds, was there "because Muslims were still looking forward to marrying idolatresses and were marrying their own daughters to idolaters, out of desire for their noble lineages. Allah, exalted is He, therefore revealed about them (for lo! a believing bondwoman is better than an idolatress though she please you...)." <sup>75</sup> The focus in this commentary thus is on the community's critical attitude towards Ibn Rawahah's marriage to a slave woman, since, as he posits, the people were more interested in name and lineage than in sincere belief—hence the revelation of the verse with its reminder that a believing slave woman is better than a non-believing free woman "even if she pleases you."

Regardless of which of the stories the verse was revealed to address, both contexts are limited and can have a grander meaning than merely prohibiting Muslim-*mushrik* marriages. It is possible, for instance, that, in the second context provided above, the message was simply that when seeking a spouse, one should look beyond social status and consider a person's piety more important. If the notion of piety is analyzed, it might also be that a pious individual is by definition a good-hearted individual due to her or his fear and love for God and thus love for and kindness towards others; as such, a non-believing, non-Muslim good human should be preferred over a non-pious believing, Muslim individual for marriage.

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<sup>75</sup> "Asbab Al-Nuzul by Al-Wahidi," trans. Mokrane Geuzzou. The *Tafsirs* (Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought: Jordan, 2012). Accessed March 7, 2013.  
<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=86&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=221&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>

While the Qur'an forbids marriage to the *mushrikeen*, it allows marriage to the People of the Book, generally understood as Christians and Jews. However, Muslim exegetes have traditionally understood this permission to be open only to Muslim men. As verse 5:5 reads,

This day are (all) good things have been made lawful for you. The food of those who have received the Scripture is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them. And so are the virtuous women of the believers and the virtuous women of those who received the Scripture before you (lawful for you) when ye give them their marriage portions and live with them in honour, not in fornication, nor taking them as secret concubines. Whoso denieth the faith, his work is vain and he will be among the losers in the Hereafter.

Interestingly, the verse implies that marriage to the People of the Book is among the good things that have been made lawful upon *kum* (the general plural second-person pronoun). One would expect that just as the food of the People of the Book is allowed to Muslims (both women and men), so would interfaith marriages with them. Otherwise, while the virtuous women of the People of the Book are among the good things allowed, their men are not. Yet, tradition holds that because the verse does not specifically stipulate that women have the same permission, it is impermissible. Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), is of the opinion that verse 2:221 forbids marriage to the *mushrikeen*—but that 5:5 then adds an exception for men only,<sup>76</sup> given that the Qur'an suggests that some Christians and some Jews are indeed among the *mushrikeen*; marriage to idolaters, however, is forbidden with no exceptions for both women and men, Ibn Kathir notes. Importantly, in the Arabic language, "there is a literary style called *al-iktifa*, where we need only to state a particular part (of a writing), from whence we may understand the other parts. For

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<sup>76</sup> Ismail Ibn Umar Ibn-Kathir, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-'Azīm* (Bairūt: Dār Al-Andalus, 1966), 37-38.

example, this verse asserts that a Muslim man may marry a woman of *ahlul kitab* [People of the Book], so logically a Muslim woman may marry a man of *ahlul kitab*."<sup>77</sup>

The reasons that tradition offers for the prohibition on women to marry non-Muslim men include: the established consensus forbids women from marrying outside of Islam; a non-Muslim man would not recognize his Muslim wife's rights and thus deprive her of the rights Islam has granted her; the woman is naturally submissive and would follow her husband's tradition and thus subject herself and her children to a non-Muslim tradition.<sup>78</sup> These reasons, however, neither apply to all women, all times, or all societies, nor are they necessarily true. In fact, they are products of the assumptions about women and women's (in)abilities upheld by members of patriarchal, male-dominated societies. They essentially promote the subjugation of women, a non-Qur'anic idea.

The Qur'anic understanding of marriage is broader than tradition, or traditional scholars and exegetes, have explained it. In some cases, the specific context of a verse has been universalized and made applicable to all situations when it may or may not be the intended message of the Qur'an. Although there are more reasons to believe that the Qur'an supports marriage between Muslim women and People of the Book, tradition consistently argues against it, relying on subjective understandings of women's roles in society to support their prohibition.

## **2.2 *Kafa'a* (Compatibility) in the Western Muslim Contexts**

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<sup>77</sup> Siti Mulia, "Promoting Gender Equity Through Interreligious Marriage: Empowering Indonesian Women," in *Muslim-non-Muslim Marriage: Political and Cultural Contestations in Southeast Asia*, ed. Gavin W. Jones (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 269.

<sup>78</sup> As cited in Siti Mulia, "Promoting Gender Equity Through Interreligious Marriage," 267.

The Qur'an seems to support the importance of compatibility in marriage between husband and wife. The Arabic term for compatibility is *kafa'a*, which comes from the Qur'anic and root word *kaf'a*, meaning "equivalent," "comparable," or "equal," such as in rank or status. But the only time this term appears in the Qur'an is in verse 112:4, which reads, *wa lam yakun lahu kufiwan a $\square$ ad* ("And there is none comparable unto Him [God]"). It is in reference to marriage that the Qur'an pushes towards compatibility: "The adulterer shall not marry save an adulteress or an idolatress, and the adulteress none shall marry save an adulterer or an idolater." (24:3). Although al-Wahidi explains that this verse was revealed to warn believing Muslim men against marrying the prostitutes of their community, it can be argued that its existence in the Qur'an implies a deeper meaning: a Muslim must marry someone with whom she/he is sexually, personally, socially and otherwise compatible. The fact that the above verse hints towards compatibility is supported by the guidelines established by Islam regarding marriage. Islam considers multiple factors that determine whether or not a Muslim couple is compatible for each other. Hanafi law, for example, outlines six criteria in terms of marital compatibility: lineage, religion, profession, freedom, piety, and possessions.<sup>79</sup> Religion, therefore, is merely one of these factors and it is not the sole determining factor, whereas the other factors, such as profession, are more worldly and have to do with the social or economic aspects of life, not religious. Applying these factors to the context of Western Muslims, one can reasonably conclude that Western Muslim women with high education and successful careers are indeed incompatible with the Muslim men who are not interested in marrying them. Should it be considered acceptable, then, for them to marry non-Muslim men with whom they feel compatible in ways other than religious?

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<sup>79</sup> Khalid Al-Azri, *Social and Gender Inequality in Oman: The Power of Religious and Political Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 36.

*Kafa'a* is “a condition in marriage which demands equivalence of social status, fortune and profession as well as parity of birth, between husbands and wife” and “the wife must not marry beneath her station.”<sup>80</sup> Islamic law’s guidelines on marital compatibility therefore seem to favor the woman in that she cannot marry below her status or rank—social, economic, professional, religious, etc—but she must marry either within her rank or above it. This can be interpreted to mean that Islam strives to ensure that the wife is fully satisfied in her marriage, that she is fully compatible with her husband. Indeed, Muslim women who are born and/or raised in the Western world share a certain sense of community and culture with the Muslim men with whom they grow up. Their sense of culture differs significantly from that of Muslims in other communities, such as in South Asia or the Middle East. It is therefore possibly an unjust practice to have the children of immigrant Muslims in the West marry among the members of the parents’ native countries, a common phenomenon discussed below.

### **2.3 The Ideal Partner According to Muslims in the West**

It is important to discuss these ideals according to the Qur’an because, while it may not be easily surveyed how seriously Muslims in America take these Qur’anic teachings, some of these teachings, such as the emphasis on kindness in husbands and obedience in wives, are often sought in potential partners. But how much *do* Muslims appeal to the above Qur’anic verses both during the process of mate selection and in the marriage? This section seeks to address the issue of marriage and the ideal partner according to Muslims as deduced from their discussions and interactions with each other online through forums and blogs as well as in Internet articles.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 30.

A blog-like website on Islam called Islamic Learning Materials features a post titled “7 Things Your Muslim Husband Won’t Tell You,” that is written by Muttaqi Ismail, author of *Sex in Islam*.<sup>81</sup> The author essentially is making the conclusion that the Muslim husband demands the seven outlined things from his wife, and he naturally loves his wife and is therefore likely never at fault when marital discord takes place. The article notes that “Women want to know their husbands love them, and men want to know their wives respect them.”<sup>82</sup> These 7 things include: the husband desires his wife’s respect; he desires her loyalty; he thinks about other women; he wants to make his wife happy; he can be a better Muslim if his wife nudges him; he loves her, even if he doesn't always show it. The advice by Ismail is written “for righteous upstanding men who do love their wives,” Ismail says to a reader in a comment under the same article. Claiming that Muslim men grow up being taught that they are meant to be the breadwinners and caretakers of the family, the article states, “You can imagine how frustrating it would be for a man, who tries his best to care for his family, to be married to a woman who doesn’t respect him. She may declare that she loves him, but without her respect, he will quickly fall out of love with her.” Here, the author is implying that the potential reason why a husband would fall out of in love with her is the wife’s “lack of respect” for her husband. Another thing that a Muslim husband will not tell his wife, according to the article, is that “he [the husband] wants to have sex more often.” For his point about loyalty, he writes, “It’s very troubling to be married to a woman who may not be around when the going gets tough,” and he assures his female readers that if they are loyal to their husbands, their husbands will be loyal to them in return as well. In his point about men’s desire for sex, Ismail writes that when wives offer their husbands excuses such as “I have

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<sup>81</sup> Muttaqi Ismail, "7 Things Your Muslim Husband Won't Tell You." *Islamic Learning Materials* Blog. December 22, 2011. Accessed March 3, 2013. <http://islamiclearningmaterials.com/7-things-your-muslim-husband-wont-tell/>.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

a headache,” “I’m not feeling good,” or “Can’t it wait till the weekend? I’m really not in the mood,” then their husbands will go to sleep “a little upset with” their wives, and “do this often enough, he’s going to start resenting you. And that resentment will build up and may lead to him being unnecessarily mean to you or losing some love.” What is not taken into consideration is the possibility that the wife perhaps does not enjoy sex with her husband because he does not satisfy her sexually. Ismail ends this point with a problematic hadith on husband-wife sexual relations: “When a man calls his wife to his bed, and she does not respond and he (the husband) spends the night angry with her, the angels curse her until morning.” Ismail Invokes this problematic hadith in order to make his point regarding the apparently insatiable sexual drive of men and women’s requirement to submit to it. This reading of Ismail’s article further supports the conclusion that he denies that men could possibly be at fault, threatening women into submitting to their husbands’ demands for sex no matter how the wives might be feeling at the given moment.

The above difficult hadith regarding angels’ cursing women who choose not to have sex with their husbands upon the latter’s demand has been a matter of contention in Muslim circles both online and offline. In Muslim forums online, the hadith is shared often either as a reminder to wives of their obligation towards their husbands or for clarification purposes. At Ummah.com, for example, a member posts it to get more insight into the hadith, asking, “is this just regarding fulfilling the husband's desires or does it also apply to when the husband sleeps in anger at his

wife, but not for sexual reasons?”<sup>83</sup> Other members respond with their perspectives, clarifications, and questions. One member asks,

Does this include time when the wife and husband had an argument and she does not want to sleep with him that one or two nights. Or when she is not feeling good? Or when she is too tired and needs to rest? Or reason because from stress she does not have sexual drive that night. Or when she wants a night to relax and read a book? or 100 other various reasons?<sup>84</sup>

The question and the challenges posed by the hadith hint at the challenge for many contemporary Muslims of reading complicated and problematic traditions regarding women’s roles and rights established in an early Islamic context. It is therefore misleading when a blog features the hadith to intimidate female readers into submitting to their husbands’ sexual desires and needs without acknowledging that the hadith may lead to questions and challenges not recognized within it.

Threads in online Muslim communities with titles such as “The Ideal Muslim Wife” or “The Ideal Muslim Husband” are common.<sup>85</sup> Muslim blogs, too, frequently discuss marriage and offer advice on what qualities to look for in a partner. In a blog run by Imam Abu Laith Luqman Ahmad from Sacramento, California, for example, the author begins with certain qualities that women should seek in their potential husbands. He writes, “Every Muslim woman who seeks marriage in Islam should be aware that you are seeking a person to not only be a husband, friend, lover, partner, and all those good things; but you are seeking someone to be the imam [leader] of

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<sup>83</sup> Proud2BeMuslim, "Angels Curse the Wife Whose Husband Sleeps Angry with Her." Muslim Forum. Posted July 17, 2010, 5:34pm. Accessed March 18, 2013. <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?265736-Angels-curse-the-wife-whose-husband-sleeps-angry-with-her&p=3918654&viewfull=1#post3918654>.

<sup>84</sup> Dour, in response to "Angels Curse the Wife ..." <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?265736-Angels-curse-the-wife-whose-husband-sleeps-angry-with-her&p=3918669&viewfull=1#post3918669>.

<sup>85</sup> On ummah.com, for example, threads with such titles appear several times: The Idea Muslim Husband: <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?351365-The-Ideal-Muslim-Husband>; The Ideal Muslim Woman and Her Husband: <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?310522-The-Ideal-Muslim-Woman-and-Her-Husband>

your home and family.”<sup>86</sup> It goes on to assure Muslim women that if they choose not to marry pious, religious men, they can have their preferences, but “let’s keep it real sisters, if you are not really trying to live the Islamic lifestyle as a wife and a woman, then don’t waste the time of a brother who is serious about this affair of ours, and you need to be clear with yourself about that.” He clarifies that the list of qualities he is suggesting are for “the new and not so new Muslim woman who wishes to be married and live an Islamic lifestyle here in the United States to the best of their ability.” The list highlights, among other things, the potential husband’s background and family, whether or not he prays, whether or not he has an imam or another influential religious personality in his life to whom he can turn for guidance, and whether he is employed. Interestingly, such advice articles are more commonly written by men rather than by women.

On the social networking site, Facebook, a group called "Muslim Marriage" offers an overview of its company as "Find your soul mate to complete a half a Deen with our help by Halal way, InshaAllah.”<sup>87</sup> The “half a *deen*” reference is popular in Muslim discussions on marriage; in fact, it is the web address of a Muslim matrimonial site<sup>88</sup> created by Baba Ali, an Iranian-born American comedian who rose to fame through his humorous Youtube videos on Islam.<sup>89</sup> The Facebook community "Muslim Marriage" had 70,489 “likes” as of March 15, 2013; on Facebook, “liking” a group or a community means that one becomes a member of the community and will receive updates from the community on her/his Facebook newsfeed, or on

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<sup>86</sup> "Qualities to Look for in a Muslim Husband by Imam Luqman Ahmad." *The Lotus Tree Blog: Enlightened Viewpoints about Islam for Thinking Men and Women*. Blog. January 25, 2012. Accessed March 20, 2013. <http://imamluqman.wordpress.com/2012/01/25/qualities-to-look-for-in-a-muslim-husband-by-imam-luqman-ahmad/>

<sup>87</sup> "Muslim Marriage." Facebook Group. Accessed April 29, 2013. <https://www.facebook.com/muslimmarriagehallal>.

<sup>88</sup> "Half Our Deen: A Muslim Matrimony Site." Accessed May 1, 2013. <http://www.halfourdeen.com/>; The Ideal Muslim Wife: <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?125482-The-Ideal-Muslim-Wife>

<sup>89</sup> His Youtube Channel can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/user/ummahfilms>.

their Facebook homepage once the person has logged in. In this group, a female member<sup>90</sup> has posted a poem with the heading “a woman’s du’a [prayer] for her future husband,” which reads as follows:

O Allah! Please grant me the one  
Who will be the garment for my soul  
Who will satisfy half of my deen  
And in doing so make me whole  
...  
Make him righteous and on your path  
In all he'll do and say  
And sprinkle water on me at Fajr [the dawn prayer]  
Reminding me to pray  
  
May he earn from halal [legal] sources  
And spend within his means  
May he seek Allah's guidance always  
To fulfill all his dreams  
  
May he always refer to Qur'an  
and the Sunnah as his moral guide  
May he thank and appreciate Allah  
For the woman at his side  
  
May he be conscious of his anger  
And often fast and pray  
Be charitable and sensitive  
In every possible way  
  
May he honor and protect me  
And guide me in this life  
And please Allah! Make me worthy  
to be his loving wife  
  
And finally, O Allah!  
Make him abundant in love and laughter  
In taqwa [piety, God-consciousness] and sincerity  
In striving for the hereafter!

May Allah grant all the Muslim sisters with such husbands... Ameen ya rab!

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<sup>90</sup> Concluded so based on the member’s female name.

Googling this poem, one finds that it appears on many Muslim forums, websites, and other communities. While it's hard to determine when and where it was first published and whether its original writer is from the Muslim West or not, its frequent appearance suggests that it reflects common opinions about what the ideal husband should be like: he follows the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the Prophet's tradition; he earns his income in Islamically legal ways and provides for his wife; he prays and fasts regularly, and he is God-conscious such that he avoids sinning due to fear of God.

Another popular poem on marriage that expresses in detail what the ideal wife is (or should be) like is entitled "The Pious Wife." It reads:

Marriage to her is one half of the deen,  
The benefit Allah has put in her is yet to be seen.  
She wears her hijab for her Lord, to please and obey,  
She turns to Allah for salaah at least five times each day.

She prays in the night and makes sure to awake you,  
And sprinkles you with water if sleep should overtake you.  
She protects her chastity with firmness because she does not desire,  
To displease Allah and end up in the tormenting fire.

She asks the people who know when matters need to be rectified,  
She is not blinded by self righteousness and foolish pride.

She opens her mouth only to say what is best,  
Not questioning her husband when he makes a request.  
She takes care of herself and never ceases to try,  
To beautify herself so to please his eye.

She is a pleasure Allah has given to us in this life,  
Be thankful to Allah alone for His blessing.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Abu.Jameelah.M, "The Pious Wife." November 22, 2012 at 12:00am. Muslim Forum. Accessed March 28, 2013. <http://www.salafitalk.net/st/viewmessages.cfm?Forum=10&Topic=725>.

As the poem expresses, the ideal wife is a pious woman who, among other things, is humble, obedient to her husband, and keeps herself attractive and beautiful to please her husband. A member of one of the sites in which this poem appears also shares another poem titled “Pious Husband”:

Marriage to him is one half of the deen,  
To please Allah (swt) is more than a dream.  
He wears his beard for his Lord, to please and obey,  
He turns to Allah (swt) for Salah at least five times a day.

He prays in the night and makes sure to wake you,  
And strives during daylight to provide and protect you.  
He lowers his gaze with firmness because he does not desire,  
To displease Allah (swt) and face His just ire,

He asks advice from the ummah, and his wife too,  
Before making decisions that he might later rue.  
To his wife he is humble and always most kind,  
Sharing his burdens with strength and clear mind.

He opens his mouth only to say what is best,  
Weighing all options ‘fore denying a request.  
He takes care of himself and family too  
Knowing that Allah (swt) will see them through.

He is a pleasure from Allah (swt) above  
Be thankful to Allah (swt) and His blessings through love.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, both the pious husband and wife pray, strive not to be lustful, speak only the best of words, and are a source of pleasure from God for each other. But where the wife wears a *hijab* (traditional Muslim head covering) “to please and obey” her Creator, the husband keeps a beard—also to please and obey his Creator., whereas the Qur’an tells husbands not to abandon their wives or leave them stranded (in 4:129, discussed above), and does not mention this to

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<sup>92</sup> "Pearls to Reach the Stars." *Alif Music: Muslim Social Network for Fans of Spiritual Music and Nasheed*. Blog. Accessed April 30, 2013. <http://www.alifmusic.net/group/pearlstoreachthestars?groupUrl=pearlstoreachthestars&id=1973186%3AGroup%3A56715&page=43>.

wives, the above poem on the pious wife claims that God has commanded woman (the wife) not to leave her husband “alone, isolated” or “stranded.”

I want to note, however, that it seems to be particularly the Muslim youth who participate in these online forums, not the marriage-minded Muslim women who are the subject of this study who tend to be in their mid- or late-twenties. For example, in a thread in which an article titled "High-flying Muslim career women willing to 'share husbands,'" Muslims on the forum Ummah.com respond with comments such as, “Haha .... I always find it funny when sisters who are so called professionals scream that there are no suitable men around. Can you please tell us the definition of your suitable men? Utter nonsense,” “A western-thinking, modern-thinking career-orientated [M]uslim woman[.] [W]hat do you do with that?” and “If you're putting your marriage off for career, then, it's not a good idea.”<sup>93</sup> These responses, with a tone of mockery or disrespect given to the reality of the situation, suggest that these respondents are likely among the youth, possibly in their teens or at some point where they are not yet considering marriage and are not aware of the difficulty many Muslims face in finding suitable spouses.

Despite the above poems and general ideas of the ideal spouse, Western Muslims do not all have same expectations of their potential spouses neither are they all necessarily clear on what they want. Researcher Anna Piela’s study of twelve women-only online forums demonstrates this eloquently.<sup>94</sup> Piela sought to understand how Muslim women discuss Islamic scriptures from their own perspectives; she also wanted to know what Muslim women

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<sup>93</sup>"High-flying Muslim Career Women Willing to 'Share Husbands.'" Thread created November 3, 2012. Muslim Forum. Accessed April 18, 2013. <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?320580-High-flying-Muslim-career-women-willing-to-share-husbands>.

<sup>94</sup> Anna Piela, "Piety as a Concept Underpinning Muslim Women’s Online Discussions of Marriage and Professional Career." *Contemporary Islam* 5, no. 3 (2011): 249-265.

understood their priorities to be, as debated in the groups. She categorizes these discussants as traditionalists, defined as those who believe in the complementarity of the two genders and sometimes believe that men are superior to women; egalitarian, which means they promote gender equality; and holistic, or those who fall in between the two categories. Piela focuses on the "dilemma" faced by many women having to choose between staying at home, working outside the home, or balancing the two. The author then analyzes the perspectives of the 3 different groups of Muslim women online to understand how each category understands these issues. For example, a group member who can be categorized as a traditionalist believes that there is much evidence in Islam that women are required to stay at home (Qur'anic verse 33:33)<sup>95</sup> and that "it is a privilege to see your kids grow"—and that a wife needs the permission of her husband in order to seek work.<sup>96</sup> Traditionalists also argue that housework and domesticity are enjoyable and glamorous as opposed to dull and repetitive. Nonetheless, they do believe that the woman may work in cases where financial instabilities require her to do so, but domestic roles are still a priority. Holists, however, argue that women are Islamically allowed to choose different lifestyles and are not all expected to have the same preferences or careers. These different categories and their respective views on gender roles, marriage, and sexuality help categorize American Muslims, immigrant or otherwise, in such a way that it is clearly illustrated that, while all have similar concerns, frustrations, or expectations from marriage or understanding of gender roles in marriage, they do not all have the same ways of addressing these issues.

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<sup>95</sup> Importantly, verse 33:33 is addressed directly to the wives of the Prophet, as 33:32 implies. O ye wives of the Prophet! Ye are not like any other women. If ye keep your duty (to Allah), then be not soft of speech, lest he in whose heart is a disease aspire (to you), but utter customary speech. And stay in your houses. Bedizen not yourselves with the bedizenment of the Time of Ignorance. Be regular in prayer, and pay the poor-due, and obey Allah and His messenger. Allah's wish is but to remove uncleanness far from you, O Folk of the Household, and cleanse you with a thorough cleansing" (33:32-33).

<sup>96</sup> Piela, 255.

The appeal to religion is a significant theme in Muslim women's (re)presentation of their selves. This is particularly common and important when they are seeking mates. For example, women are more likely than men to present themselves as religious, one study on criteria of mate selection among American Muslims finds.<sup>97</sup> The study also finds that women universally, from different religions, tend to highlight their level of religiosity or their search for a religious-inclined husband. Two reasons that the authors believe might explain this are:

Women are culturally expected to stay home to be caregivers and homemakers, while men are expected to participate in the paid labor force and be breadwinners. Consequently, women's low participation in the labor force when compared with men's provides them with more time and opportunity to participate in religious activities. [...]Another perspective proposes that differential socialization is responsible for sex differences in religiosity. Women, more than men, are socialized to be passive, emotional, 438 A.M. Badahdah, K.A. Tiemann / *Evolution and Human Behavior* 26 (2005) 432–440 submissive, and sensitive, traditional gender attributes correlated with religiosity.<sup>98</sup>

These reasons, however, only explain the women's own religiosity and not what they are likely to gain from religious husbands. Perhaps women seek religious husbands more than men seek religious wives because they (the women) assume that a religious husband would by default be a pious, God-conscious person and therefore uphold his responsibilities and roles properly. When he takes his roles seriously within the marriage, the marriage is likely to succeed, and women, the above study also concludes, seek long-term relationships (marriages) more than men seem to do.<sup>99</sup>

Other studies show that Muslim women, particularly in America, harbor negative attitudes towards marrying men of their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Black women, for

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<sup>97</sup> Abdallah Badahada and Kathleen Tiemann, "Mate Selection Criteria among Muslims Living in America." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 26, no. 5 (2005): 437.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 438.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

example, prefer to marry non-blacks because of unacceptable male behavior, and South Asian women discourage non-South Asian women from marrying South Asians because there are "better options" out there.<sup>100</sup> The youth clearly support and promote mixed marriages (interethnic, not interfaith) as a means to resist and overcome negative male behavior in their communities. African American Muslim women turn to interethnic marriages because of the lack of availability of black Muslim men: "it's not like there are just black guys running all over the place," some of them say.<sup>101</sup> Others, however, do not see themselves marrying anyone but someone of their own heritage because of the belief that they might be expected to conform to the cultural and social norms of the culture they marry into.<sup>102</sup> This desire to marry someone outside of their culture is yet another element of the revival of Islam in the West among the youth and their belief that their parents' Islam is less authentic because it is too influenced by "culture."

The guidelines that marriage-minded men and women are taught in Muslim blogs to abide by are ingrained in male-dominated notions of female subjectivity that promote men's superiority over women at least in terms of leadership. Clearly, not all Western Muslims are alike or have the same standards and expectations in marriage and during mate selection. However, religiosity in their own selves as well as expecting it from their potential husbands does seem to be a theme that commonly comes up. It makes sense, then, that one of the most popular sub-topics on marriage in online Muslim spaces is that of the ideal husband or wife, in which piety is often invoked, especially among the youth.

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<sup>100</sup> Jamillah Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender Within the Ummah* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 223.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

## 2.4 The Ideal Muslim Partner According to South Asian Muslim Marriage Manuals

### Classical and Medieval *Fatwas*

“It should be understood well that the intimacy and contact between husband and wife is such that they will have to live together for the rest of their lives,” writes Ashraf Ali Thanvi (d. 1943) in his book of law entitled *Heavenly Ornaments* (originally published in Urdu in 1905).<sup>103</sup>

If they love each other and are compatible to each other, then there is no greater bounty than this. And if, Allah forbid, there is conflict between the two, then there is no greater calamity than this. Therefore, as far as is possible, live with his heart in your hands and carry out your duties through the mere indication of his eyes. If he orders you to tie your hands and remain standing the entire night, then the prosperity of this world and the hereafter is in this that you bear this minor difficulty of this world and thereby attain the prosperity and success of the hereafter. Never do anything that is contrary to his mood. If he regards the day as night, you should also do the same. [...] Keep the room clean and do not let it get dirty. The bed should not be dirty and untidy. Remove all creases and wrinkles from it. If the pillow is dirty, change its cover. If there isn't a cover, sew one. If you do all these things *after* he tells you, what good is there in that?<sup>104</sup>

Advice like that presented above to women—purportedly Islamic obligations of which they are merely being reminded—continue to appear in marriage manuals and other didactic literature throughout much of the Muslim world. This section, however, highlights the ideal wife according to the marriage manuals of South Asia rather than to those of the Arab world primarily because of their influence in the Western Muslim world among Muslims of South Asian background. These manuals claim that they are entirely Islamic and that the advice they give is not from the authors themselves but from Islam, a generally effective way to legitimate their viewpoints. However, the role of existing social and cultural norms of marriage, gender, and sexuality in the production and the wide acceptance of the manuals must be recognized, since

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<sup>103</sup> As mentioned earlier, I emphasize South Asian marriage manuals instead of Arab, Persian, or other marriage manuals because South Asian Muslims are the largest immigrant population throughout the West. It is therefore important to know what sources they appeal to when setting their marital standards—and among the most popular sources from which they draw information on marriage are marriage manuals.

<sup>104</sup> Ashraf Ali Thanvi, *Bahishti Zewar (Heavenly Ornaments)* (Karachi: Zam Zam, 1999), 464.

most of them arose in response to the western ideals that were being spread throughout South Asia by the colonialists.

Ashraf Ali Thanvi's *Bahishti Zewar* ("Heavenly Ornaments") has for decades been afforded to women as an important part of their dower and dowry, a wedding gift of sorts. The book has been translated into English, titled "A Gift for the Muslim Couple," and published even across the Western world, particularly in Canada where it was reportedly sold out.<sup>105</sup> Its influence on (South Asian) Muslims today is worth noting and studying, even as ideas of women, sexuality, and marriage appear to be evolving among Muslims.

Judith Walsh argues that South Asian marriage manuals from late nineteenth century onwards were a response, a resistance to colonialism; they aimed to re-define the ideal domestic life against the backdrop of British influence to restore certain values that were being lost to the colonialists.<sup>106</sup> When contextualized thus, these manuals are not restricted religiously but could also be applicable to religious groups other than Muslims in South Asia. The writers of various religious communities appeal to their own religions as frequently as necessary to remind their audiences of the perceived divine origins of the rulings. For example, popular Hindu manuals from Bengal and India draw from the teachings of Manu, father of humankind in the Hindu tradition and author of the *Dharma Shastra*, the body of Jurisprudence that dominates the family law of many Hindus today, in order to justify existing prevalent ideas about women. Manu is believed to have said, "Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and

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<sup>105</sup> Terri Davidson, "Book tells Muslim men how to beat and control their wives." *The Toronto Sun*. Published March 23, 2012. Accessed November 3, 2012. <http://www.torontosun.com/2012/03/23/book-tells-muslim-men-how-to-beat-and-control-their-wives>.

<sup>106</sup> Judith Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 1.

her sons guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence,”<sup>107</sup> and “A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust and is devoid of any good qualities.”<sup>108</sup> These teachings are presented as religiously sanctioned motivations behind the manuals’ advice to women.

With such expectations of wives, it is not surprising that South Asian Muslim authorities justified similar ideas by turning to hadiths, traditional patriarchal Qur’anic interpretations of women’s roles and rights, and the interpretations of Muslim jurists and scholars from previous centuries to propagate their ideas on the wife’s roles in marriage. These authorities were on the one hand strongly opposed to the treatment and position of women in non-Islamic religions, but subtly shared their beliefs on the other.<sup>109</sup>

Importantly, these marriage manuals have been written by men, although there are a few advice manuals written by women for women as well,<sup>110</sup> and their general audience tends to be the South Asian Muslims in the West. While most of them are written for women, they do contain information for husbands, such as their obligations towards their wives and what they should expect from their wives. Some of them clearly state who their audience is, such as *Ashraf’s Blessings of Marriage*: “Through *tawfeeq* [success] from Allah, we attempt to present authentic Teachings of Pious Scholars in Light of the Qur’an and Hadeeth for the benefit of western educated Muslims.”<sup>111</sup> In fact, many of them are written either as responses to Western ideals spreading into Muslim societies, or for the Western Muslim audience to help them return

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<sup>107</sup> As cited in Walsh, 8.

<sup>108</sup> Walsh, 8.

<sup>109</sup> It is not uncommon, for example, to read about the apparently universal mistreatment and subjugation of women in non-Muslim cultures as well as in pre-Islamic societies.

<sup>110</sup> Judith Walsh, "What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice." *The Journal for South Asian Studies*. 56. no. 3 (1997), 642.

<sup>111</sup> Muhammad Aslam Patel and Ashraf Ali Thanvi, *Ashraf’s Blessings of Marriage* (Dewsbury: Ashraf’s Amānat, 1999), v.

to the “right Path,” to revive the spirit of Islam, or at least to obstruct Western Muslims from being influenced by western, non-Islamic ideals.

Most of the authors of the marriage manuals are not mere ordinary men but are religious leaders and scholars, men of established authority who are highly revered and regarded as pious and sincere teachers of Islam, such as Thanvi and his students. As such, marriage manuals for women written by Muslim men presumably have theological bases for their claims and assertions about women’s position in society and religion. Their audience therefore trusts them—but the trust stems not just from their religious authority alone but also from the fact that their teachings about women and marriage were not outlandish but something with which their audience is already familiar. Since these ideas were popular and also in practice already, not just among Muslims but also among their non-Muslim neighbors, it can be assumed that the audience had no significant reason to doubt what they were being taught.

#### *The Evolution of the Wife’s Roles from Early Muslim Scholarship to Those in Marriage Manuals*

This section discusses the evolution of the wife’s roles as understood by early Muslim jurists to contemporary South Asian marriage manuals. It highlights the female original role as the husband’s sexual partner, fulfilling his sexual demands at his volition, to her role as a completely domestic figure, one whose existence, temper, and even fate in the Hereafter are dependent entirely on her husband’s existence and temper. Ultimately, the more she takes care of him, obeys him, and respects him, the better off she is to be in the next world.

In discussions on marriage and the role of wives in early Islamic literature, we note that the wife has only one obligation as understood by the jurists: that of tending to her husband’s

sexual desires.<sup>112</sup> In fact, the term *nikah*, translated as marriage, literally means sexual intercourse, understood by the jurists as “an agreement resulting in the lawful enjoyment of a woman.”<sup>113</sup> Additionally, “Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafi’ jurists emphatically denied any wifely duty to perform housework.”<sup>114</sup> Domestic works, such as cooking, cleaning, raising the children, have been traditionally assigned to women—wives—as their duty but were not a requirement upon the wife in early Islam, as is evidenced by 10<sup>th</sup>-century Hanafi jurist Ahmad b. ‘Umar al-Khassaf: He was asked, “What if she [the wife] doesn’t have a servant and her husband supports her, must she bake bread and labor to prepare [food] for herself?” to which he replied, “If she says, ‘I won’t do it,’ she is not compelled to do it. Rather, his claim on her is her making herself available for her husband, not for these tasks.”<sup>115</sup> Some jurists offered that the husband hire a cook for the family, while others, such as al-Shafi’, suggested that this would be necessary only if the wife was accustomed to that kind of service in her father’s home.<sup>116</sup>

From classical understandings of female sexuality to contemporary marriage manuals, ideas on masculinity, femininity, and sexuality have remained rather consistent, barely developing and changing throughout history. In fact, the little change that can be seen is in the direction of devaluing female sexuality, and women's rights. Whereas early Islamic scholars consistently taught, for example, that the wife’s only role was to be sexually available for her husband, as discussed above, these marriage manuals not only remind women of this obligation

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<sup>112</sup> Kecia Ali, "Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence: The Necessity for Critical Engagement with Marriage and Divorce Law." In *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*. Ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 170.

<sup>113</sup> Madelain Farah, *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam: A Translation of Al-Ghazali's Book on the Etiquette of Marriage from the Ihya* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah, 1984), 14.

<sup>114</sup> Ali, "Progressive Muslims," 170.

<sup>115</sup> As cited in Ali, "Progressive Muslims," 170.

<sup>116</sup> Ali, "Progressive Muslims," 170.

but also expect them to uphold cultural and other ideals, such as maintaining a tidy house, being excellent cooks, and serving not just their husbands but also their in-laws. They teach:

The house should be kept neat and tidy. All bedding and laundry should be regularly cleaned and replaced in their pre-arranged places. To act only when he comments is no big achievement. Success is to organize all domestic chores upon one's initiative without him having to prompt you. By relieving the husband from domestic worries, his heart and mind will become content and forever indebted to you.<sup>117</sup>

Here, the wife's role goes beyond that of serving her husband sexually at the husband's whims; in addition to the role that classical jurists assigned her, she also has to ensure that everything around the house is taken care of, from keeping a clean house to regular laundry, and these domestic activities are done to impress the husband and to relieve him of the same chores. The roles assigned to Muslim women in marriage manuals, therefore, are not the same roles assigned by classical *fiqh*, but they point to the devaluation trend of female sexuality and the female sex in general.

These differing views on the wife's roles and obligations according to male Muslim scholars can be attributed to the social and historical contexts in which these manuals were produced. They are clearly written for South Asian readers—wives—in that they address social phenomena, practices, and customs that are prevalent in South Asian cultures. For instance, in a section titled “Advice to Women in General,” Thanvi writes:

Do not attend the following ceremonies: the Hindu ceremony of shaving the child's head for the first time, forty days after child birth, six days after child birth, circumcision, *aqeeqah* [the celebration of a child through the sacrificing of an animal], proposal, ceremony held on the fourth day after *mehendi* [the ceremony of applying henna on the hands of a bride before her wedding], etc. Nor should you invite anyone to such ceremonies.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Patel and Thanvi, 203.

<sup>118</sup> Thanvi, 667.

He does not explain why, but he mentions in a footnote that the *mehendi* ceremony takes place the night before the wedding and that this ceremony has no validity in the Shari'ah. References are also commonly made to the issue of dowry, the gift the bride's family gives to the husband's family, to comment on its un-Islamic nature and to condemn South Asian Muslims for making it an essential part of the wedding. The list of things he forbids upon the woman include applying kohl in the eyes, oiling the hair, applying henna, and wearing dyed or colorful clothes—almost all of which are part of daily life for women in South Asian cultures. While the latter ruling is not found in early Islamic literature, the insistence that the divorced or widowed woman is forbidden to leave her house during her *'iddah* (waiting period) can be found in early Islamic teachings on marriage and divorce: According to a hadith narrated by Abu Daud, "I heard Ahmad [Ibn Hanbal] say, 'The Triply divorced woman leaves the house [of her husband] to protect her reputation.... But the irrevocably divorced woman does not leave her house.'"<sup>119</sup> It seems that the wife is not only to mourn the death of her husband but also the divorce, since Thanvi links the two together and states that it is called mourning. Such mourning is customary in South Asian cultures and expected of wives because of the value attached to her life when her husband is present and her devaluing once he is gone.

The way the marriage manuals understand the behavior of the ideal Muslim female needs to be addressed here because they partially help explain some of the early points raised about husband's sexual desires and the need for women to fulfill them. Because women are naturally modest and shy, the manuals say, they do not initiate sexual activities, especially on the wedding night, and the husband is thus cautioned to be gentle and patient. The woman's sexual agency is notably absent in almost all of these manuals, even those written in the 1990s, such as *Ashraf's*

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<sup>119</sup> Susan Spector, *Chapters on Marriage and Divorce: Responses of Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Rahwayh* (Austin: University of Texas, 1993), 85-86.

*Blessings of Marriage*, first published in 1999 and written for Western Muslims. Here, we read advice for the husband regarding the first time he meets his wife—on their wedding night: the two were “complete strangers” before the wedding night and, although they are now in each other’s presence and are alone because of the *nikah*, the wife’s “natural restraint (a quite praiseworthy virtue in Muslim ladies) will still prevent her from becoming too intimate and or open.”<sup>120</sup> Moreover, the book, addressed directly to men in the second-person in this discussion, states, “Also remember, *tab’ee haya* [natural modesty] in Muslim ladies prevents them from making-love immediately...”<sup>121</sup> However, the book advises the husband not to approach his wife with greed or to appear selfish on the first night; foreplay is encouraged at all times of making love.<sup>122</sup> It nonetheless suggests that the man is always to be the initiator of sex and the woman always the recipient.

The wife’s feelings and emotions are also expected to mirror and be subject to those of her husband’s. As soon as she sees him, she must evaluate his temperament to determine the manner in which she should talk to him. If she finds him “in a pleasant humorous mood,” she should “engage him in light-hearted talk and jokes,” thus addressing his mood accordingly.<sup>123</sup> However, this does not mean, the manual cautions, that the husband-wife relationship is

one of only love, play and humor... it is also necessary to couple love with respect for one’s husband. To try to think of him as one’s equal is a grave mistake. Never ever ask him to physically serve you (it is, of course, quite another aspect for him to act in accordance with the Sunnah of Nabee and help you). Even if he should lovingly come and massage your head and feet...politely, ask him not to take the trouble. Why? Because would you prefer your father to physically serve you? Do remember a husband’s rank is higher than one’s father. (Of course, if he insists out of

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<sup>120</sup> Patel, 105.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>122</sup> Patel, 113.

<sup>123</sup> Patel, 201.

love and concern, there is nothing wrong, for he is your lover, but do not be so audacious as to ask him to physically serve you.)<sup>124</sup>

Patel claims that the “husband-wife relationship” is not one of only love and play and also states that it comes also with respect for one’s husband. It is a reassertion of the claim that the wife’s feelings and emotions are to be displayed in response to the husband’s. The equality of the wife or equal respect for the wife is explicitly rejected. In fact, the wife is told that her husband’s rank is greater than even that of her father, to the point that she cannot even ask her husband for a massage in the same way she would never make such a request of her father. The use of “audacious” is also problematic: the wife is virtually forbidden to make any demands upon her husband under any circumstances, and she must “politely” stop her husband if he offers to massage her. On the one hand, the manual all throughout speaks about the intimacy and the closeness between the husband and the wife, but on the other hand, it woefully distances the wife from her husband in advice such as that quoted above; the authors thus appear to equate intimacy with sexual activities only and refuse to consider other closeness and bonding between the partners, such as offers for massages to each other or mutual services towards each other. Most problematically, perhaps, is that the wife is told that her husband is not her equal and it is a grave mistake to think otherwise: without using the binary of “superior” and “inferior,” the text makes it very clear that the husband is superior to her in ranking and undoubtedly in value as well.

While Thanavi insist that his recommendations are from the Qur’an and *hadith*, there seems to be a contradiction between a famous hadith and the above statement regarding the husband’s ranking:

Narrated Abu Huraira: “A man came to the Prophet and said, ‘O Messenger of God! Who among the people is the most worthy of my good companionship? The Prophet said: ‘Your mother.’ The

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<sup>124</sup> Patel, 202.

man said, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: Then your mother. The man further asked, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: 'Then your mother.' The man asked again, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: 'Then your father.'"<sup>125</sup>

Muslims commonly refer to the above hadith to argue in support of the mother's high status in Islam.<sup>126</sup> Here, the father's ranking is followed by that of the mother's, and no mention is made of the husband's. That the manuals privilege the husband even over the father despite prophetic tradition further supports the claim that these guidelines are far less rooted in religion or religious teachings than they are in cultural, social ideas of the husband's high position in society.

Why is the wife supposed to be a good wife? The manuals say that by being a good wife and obeying him, she helps her husband achieve heaven in this world,<sup>127</sup> while she earns heaven in the next world by obeying him: "A women who dies whilst her husband is pleased with her will enter Jannah [heaven]," and "Whichever lady performs the five Fardh Salah [obligatory prayers]; fasts the month of Ramadhan; protects her chastity and honor; and obeys her husband, may enter Jannah by whichever portal she desires."<sup>128</sup> Her salvation thus is contingent not upon her individual spiritual obligations alone but by those in addition to obedience to her husband. In fact, "There are three types of persons whose Salah [prayer] is not accepted nor does any of their good deeds rise (towards heaven)... (Amongst these three, one is), 'A women [sic] whose husband is angry with her.'"<sup>129</sup> A wife does not earn a reward only in heaven, however: she

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<sup>125</sup> *Sahih Bukhari*, Volume 8, Book 73, Number 2. Available online at <http://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/results.php5>.

<sup>126</sup> See, for example, "Islam's Women: Jewels of Islam" online at [http://www.islamswomen.com/articles/mothers\\_in\\_islam.php](http://www.islamswomen.com/articles/mothers_in_islam.php). Accessed December 4, 2012.

<sup>127</sup> Sabiruddin, *A Muslim Husband and Wife* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1990), 28.

<sup>128</sup> As cited in Patel, 199.

<sup>129</sup> As cited in Patel, 199.

benefits from obeying her husband in this world, too, since other people praise her for being a virtuous and obedient wife,<sup>130</sup> and her husband has a chance of appreciating her as well:

If your husband scolds or rebukes you out of anger, control yourself and do not answer him, No matter what he says, remain silent. Once his anger subsides, he himself will regret his actions and will become extremely pleased with you. Insha Allah, he will not get angry with you again. However, if you do not keep quiet and display any defiance, then the entire incident will have disastrous consequences.<sup>131</sup>

Here, again, the wife is reminded of the virtue of remaining silent and taming her emotions and feelings to be submissive to her husband's. The possibility that the husband may be at fault and will not change for the better regardless of the wife's response to him is entirely dismissed, and the wife is told that if she reacts to his anger, the situation will turn disastrous—and it will clearly be her fault.

These marriage manuals ignore the wife's agency, the recognition that Islam gives her as spiritually equal to her husband, and her individual deeds in attaining heaven or hell in the Hereafter. While initially in Islam, the wife's only role was to have sex with her husband whenever he wanted is, these South Asian Muslim marriage manuals extend this sexual role to her domestic and social role as well. Because they are grounded in the South Asian cultural notions of gender role, many of the roles discussed in them indicate that they are reflective of South Asian cultures and not of Islam, such as in the commandment that the wife must take care of and obey her in-laws.

### *The Ideal Wife in Marriage Manuals*

Since the roles of the wife in these marriage manuals is essentially that she is to live under his rule and that she cannot disobey him or do anything that would make him even remotely

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<sup>130</sup> Thanvi, 466.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 465.

unhappy, this section collects the different roles that the wife has to play that make her an ideal spouse.

Almost no emphasis is given to the criteria of a good Muslim husband in these manuals. They seem to imply that the husband is already an ideal husband, naturally so, and that how he treats or views his wife is due entirely to the wife's interaction with him. Only in a few instances is the husband at fault, such as when he does not fulfill his obligation to "maintain a constant 'eye' on his wife and family's spiritual and educational needs and training."<sup>132</sup> This failure is "the major cause for the ills rocking our society," the manuals assert.<sup>133</sup>

Clearly, the ideal Muslim wife is one who, among other things, accepts and respects her husband's superior position over her. She acknowledges that he has authority over her, and she bestows that upon him herself willingly and enthusiastically; she does not challenge him under any circumstances. She always appears aesthetically appealing to her husband as this is one of her many ways to show that she appreciates all her husband buys for her and because she wants the husband to enjoy the fruits of his earning.<sup>134</sup> The ideal Muslim wife also never nags, criticizes, or angers her husband if he is having an affair: she reminds him "calmly and softly" of the harms of the illicit relation and prays for his guidance; she also understands that he is having an affair because he is emotionally disturbed, and the way she handles the situation can determine the ultimate outcome of the affair.<sup>135</sup> She does not mishandle the situation by attempting to "overpower" him because she remembers "very well" that God "has endowed men with valor and bravery. They cannot be overpowered by being forced to do something, and they

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<sup>132</sup> Patel, 140.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 215.

cannot be subdued. The best way of overpowering them is to flatter them and obey them.”<sup>136</sup> She also knows that the woman who does attempt to overpower her husband is “immature” and does not realize what the consequences of her actions will be in the future.<sup>137</sup> She is always happy and joyous because it makes her husband happy, since “it is part of human psychology for a person to be affected by the moods of those around him.”<sup>138</sup>

Nevertheless, the manuals still point out that the wife has certain rights that the husband is obligated to grant her. These include having sex with her (though not necessarily because she wants or initiated it), financially providing for her, being neither “over suspicious” nor “too lax”;<sup>139</sup> not abusing her in any way; and allowing her to visit her *mahram* relatives.<sup>140</sup> The husband cannot grant his wife any wishes that are against the Shari’ah, such as when she makes demands upon him that make him “his wife’s slave.”<sup>141</sup> In all events, she is to remind him of her rights “politely” rather than demand them, as though her were her slave. The husband, too, has certain rights that the wife is obligated to fulfill as long as they are within the bounds of the *Shari’a*. The problem here, though, appears to be that virtually everything and anything is deemed “within the bounds of Shari’a” when it is for the husband: standing “with arms folded the whole night or [calling] daytime as night time” if the husband demands it so;<sup>142</sup> not performing *nafl*, or extra voluntary prayers, or fasting in a month other than Ramadhan because the husband does not want her to; and not visiting her parents’ or children’s funerals if the husband does not allow her.

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<sup>136</sup> Thanvi, 465.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Patel, 216.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 220.

<sup>140</sup> An Arabic term that refers to those with whom a Muslim persona may not marry. For women, their brothers, sons, fathers, and fathers-in-law are all *mahram*.

<sup>141</sup> Patel, 142.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 200.

The marriage manuals cited above often accompany South Asian brides to their husband's home, including South Asian brides in the West. They therefore clearly play a significant role in how these women view marriage and their roles vis-à-vis their husbands'. When they place women below men, particularly wives below their husbands, and teach women that their ultimate role is to please their husbands, claiming to be drawing these teachings from Islam, it is not unlikely that many women would accept them as truth and attempt to live by them. In fact, their popularity suggests that they might be influential as well. What is unclear, however, is which groups of women follow them—e.g., their education level, their socio-economic status, and their standards in marriage.

#### **2.4 Compatibility Issues and the Unavailable Ideal Mate**

According to recent, non-academic reports as well as Muslim women's blogs and other online discussions, Muslim women in the West are finding it increasingly difficult to find compatible partners for marriage. In this section, we will explore this unavailability and the reasons offered by Muslim women themselves for why they are unable to find men whom they would feel comfortable marrying.

It is not uncommon for Muslim women in the West, particularly in America and Britain, to publicly express their interest in finding a partner as well as their difficulty in doing so. According to an article published on the influential Muslim blog that features diverse views from Muslims around the world, "GOATMILK: An intellectual playground," the "contemporary Muslim woman," particularly the American Muslim woman as is specified in said article, women over the age of thirty-five are having even more difficulties finding Muslim husbands. As the author, Zeba Iqbal, writes,

My sincere request to the Muslim American community, namely eligible men and their mothers, matrimonial sites and event organizers, and *rishtha* [match-making] aunties everywhere: ‘Please stop ignoring me, and many others like me. I am part of a growing population of single women over 35 in our community, and we are not going away.’<sup>143</sup>

Acknowledging that the problem of finding suitable mates among American Muslims is more widespread than imagined, she urges the Muslim community to discuss the issue more publicly to raise its importance and awareness and to help those women who are seeking partners. “I believe we all need help,” she writes. “We need to take this discussion out of our living rooms to Muslim social scientists, our prominent imams and our community leaders. We need to do research, ask for their expertise and assistance.”<sup>144</sup> Addressing the widespread claim among especially Western Muslim men, as will be discussed below, that those women who “cannot” find partners need to “lower their standards,” the author adds, “I honestly do not believe I am ‘incapable’ of finding a ‘suitable match’, or that I am too old to have children, too picky, too ambitious, can’t cook or placing too much focus on my career. Yet this is what I have heard for the better part of 10 years.”<sup>145</sup> These are some of the misconceptions against Muslim women born and/or raised in the West—i.e., that their standards are too high, that they cannot cook or do not know how to manage a husband and a family, that they are too career-oriented, and so on.

As noted in another article from GOAT MILK, “A Few Good Men? The Muslim American Woman’s Dilemma” by Sondos Kholoki-Kahf,

“I tend to meet two types [of men],” says Maryam [a pseudonym], 28, who has also been searching for a mate since college. “The first is the practicing Muslim brother who has his act together, but unfortunately has some really incompatible

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<sup>143</sup> Zeba Iqbal, “Breaking a Stalemate.” *GOATMILK An Intellectual Playground*, ed. Wajahat Ali. Posted March 12, 2009. Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://goatmilkblog.com/2009/03/12/contemporary-muslim-woman-series-over-30-and-unmarried-breaking-a-stalemate/>.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

ideas about women and gender roles. The second type I meet is progressive and open-minded and is truly looking for a partner in life, but is not a practicing Muslim.”<sup>146</sup>

The article provides examples of several other single Muslim women seeking husbands and adds that they are among the “thousands of American Muslim women between the ages of 25 and 30 struggling to find” decent suitors.<sup>147</sup> A female blogger who appears to be an American of Arab origin, has named her blog “Do I Have a Husband Yet?” in which she frequently posts about her dilemma and often humorously dedicates an entire posting to “No, I do not have a husband yet,” titling the post “day #10 million.”<sup>148</sup> In one of her popular posts, titled "Top Six Things 25/26/27/28+ [Year] Old Single Muslim Girls Don't Want to Hear" she condemns the practice that when women get married, they immediately start asking their female friends with they will get married, too, among other such common practices and statements.<sup>149</sup>

The problem of single Muslim women’s inability to find suitable Muslim husbands is not just an American Muslim issue; this “growing Muslim spinster crisis”<sup>150</sup> is a common problem shared by Muslims throughout the West. Responding to this “Muslim spinster crisis,” a Scottish Muslim scholar issued a *fatwa*, or a religious statement, in May 2010 that disallows Muslim men in Scotland to marry women outside of the country, or to return to their homelands for brides, when there is an overwhelmingly high number of available Muslim women in the country:

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<sup>146</sup> Sondos Kholoki-Kahf, "A Few Good Men." GOATMILK: An intellectual playground, ed. Wajahat Ali. Posted June 10, 2008. Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://goatmilkblog.com/2008/06/10/a-few-good-men-the-muslim-american-womans-dilemma/>.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> "Day #10 million." *Do I Have a Husband Yet: Just Wondering*. Blog. Posted February 4, 2013. Accessed March 20, 2013. <http://doihaveahusbandyet.tumblr.com/post/42296667465/day-10-million>.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, "Top Six Things 25/26/27/28+ yr Old Singe Muslim Girls Don't Want to Hear." Posted March 13, 2013. Accessed March 20, 2013. <http://doihaveahusbandyet.tumblr.com/post/45297770678/top-six-things-25-26-27-28-yr-old-single-muslim-girls>.

<sup>150</sup> Syma Mohammed, "Why British Muslim Women Struggle to Find A Marriage Partner." *The Guardian*. Published January 18, 2012. Accessed March 20, 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2012/jan/18/british-muslim-women-marriage-struggle>.

Shaykh Jamil, an Islamic scholar who set up a family counselling service called Unity Family Services, said: “I would say the situation is at a critical level. There are many well-educated women up and down the country who want to get married but are not finding the right match. There is an acute shortage of suitable male options and the ones who are available are getting married from back home. Consequently, this leads to many women reluctantly having to bring someone over from south Asia and that can lead to problems. The men coming over have a different mentality and are not used to seeing a female working or having a life outside of the home. It makes sense to marry from within the UK as both partners will speak English and will be familiar with British culture. This will also make raising children much easier.”<sup>151</sup>

The same source quotes Shaaista Yousaf, a Scottish Muslim woman who has been arranging marriages for over a decade, who says: “There are mothers who insist their daughters only marry within a specific caste. They don’t like them getting married outside of the *biraderi* [extended clan affiliation]. Such an issue automatically narrows their choice.”<sup>152</sup> This is not uncommon among many families, especially from South Asia, who expect their daughters—if not all children—to marry within a certain caste, or a certain race or geographical region, thereby restricting their options even further. Even a marriage between two people from the same country but different ethnicities and/or cities is often unacceptable. A (presumably female) Muslim from London writes in a blog post title “British Muslim Girls Struggle to Find a Husband,” expresses her agreement with *fatwa* from the Scottish Imam and proposes that British Muslim men marry only British Muslim women; she theorizes that the reason there is this “surplus of Muslim women on the market” is that Muslim men and their “mummies” do not prefer educated and British Muslim women for marriage:

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<sup>151</sup> “Muslim Leader: Find Wives in Britain Not Pakistan and India.” Herald Scotland. Published May 23, 2010. Accessed March 20, 2013. <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/muslim-leader-find-wives-in-britain-not-pakistan-and-india-1.1029860>.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

Apparently due to Muslim families particularly from the Sub Continent going back to their roots to find a wife this has resulted in a surplus of Muslim women on the market. The reasons are complex for why this happens although I don't buy the culture explanation. My view is that a number of Muslim men along with their mummies are none [too] keen on confident articulate and educated British Muslim girls and as a result prefer the pliant, quiet, cooking and in the kitchen type. London Muslim believes we should have British Muslim men for British Muslim women.<sup>153</sup>

Dutch Muslims, too, are confronting this crisis. According to Radio Netherlands Worldwide in an article titled "Modern Dutch Muslim Women Can't Find Suitable Partners," "The current generation of young Dutch Muslim women are often quite well-educated and open-minded compared to most of their potential spouses, many of whom do not want a 'modern' wife."<sup>154</sup> It explains that Muslim men make false promises to their potential wives, "such as allowing them to get their driving license," but change their minds after marriage. This, the article concludes, is the reason why "a growing group of Dutch-Moroccan women decide to remain single." Quoting Naoual Loiazizi, a female member Netherlands Association of Moroccan Women, it states, "They are strong-headed and refuse to change for a man. However, some women lower their standards after turning 30 because they want to start a family."

The concept of problem of incompatibility consistently comes up in this discussion of Muslim women and in their concerns of not being able to find compatible Muslim husbands. That a *fatwa* had to be issued in order to address the problem is revealing enough: it is time for Muslim leaders to intervene and figure out how to address the problem.

### *The Concept of Compatibility among Contemporary Western Muslim Women*

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<sup>153</sup> <http://londonmuslims.blogspot.com/2010/05/british-muslim-girls-struggle-to-find.html>.

<sup>154</sup> "Modern Dutch Muslim Women Can't Find Suitable Partners." *Radio Netherlands Worldwide*. Last accessed April 20, 2013. <http://www.rnw.nl/english/bulletin/modern-dutch-muslim-women-cant-find-suitable-partners>.

Discussions on career, higher levels of education, and a tendency to favor non-traditional gender roles—e.g., being working mothers, not desiring to stay at home, expecting the husband to help with housework, declining to live with in-laws—commonly arise among such women. Blame is often placed on the men and their mothers in particular and parents in general for not raising them in such a way that they would be motivated to seek higher education the way men are and so that they would know how to communicate with Muslim women. In "Where Are the Healthy Gender Relations in the Muslim Community?" Salam Al-Marayati writes, "More young Muslim women are achieving in academics and careers at higher rates than young Muslim men. You find more women doctors, lawyers and even engineers in our community. That intimidates the guys. They can't handle women achieving when they are struggling in their schools or in finding a profession acceptable to their parents, which typically means being a doctor or lawyer or engineer."<sup>155</sup> She contests that the male should be, or can be, the sole breadwinner of the family does not work in today's world: "But this idea of the man being the sole breadwinner in the family is very rare, folks. Financial responsibilities are shared now between husband and wife, and so should parental responsibilities."<sup>156</sup> She advises Muslim men that if they want to "develop machismo, there is nothing more endearing to a woman than a man who can take care of her children and her home." But this care is not about providing for her financially necessarily, but it is about "taking the kids out so mom can relax, cleaning the dishes after meals and making a gourmet meal for your lover. But still take her out to a fancy restaurant once in a while."<sup>157</sup> She concludes by appealing to Islam's idea of justice: "If Islam's essence is justice, then aren't we

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<sup>155</sup> Salam Al-Marayati, "Where Are the Healthy Gender Relations in the Muslim Community?" Patheos: Hosting the Conversation on Faith. Published January 17, 2013. Accessed March 21, 2013.

[www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2013/01/where-are-the-healthy-gender-relations-in-the-muslim-community/](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2013/01/where-are-the-healthy-gender-relations-in-the-muslim-community/).

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

violating the essence of Islam when we accept Muslim men marrying non-Muslims while we violently reject Muslim women doing the same? I'm not saying I have the answers, but what I am saying is there needs to be more conversations about this crisis." Her comment on justice can be linked to the Islamic idea of *kafa'a*: it is, indeed, more just for a female to feel compatible and fulfilled in her marriage than not; Islam would otherwise not sanction it the way it did.

Other Muslim females share similar sentiments regarding Muslim women's rising levels of education and their expectation of men to help with domestic chores. Sondos Kholoki-Kahf, in her aforementioned article, shares the comment of an interviewee who says, "I recently had a suitor who told me he would be willing to help me [around the house] by not making a mess." The suitor also "told her she should not use her job as an excuse to ask him to help out at home."<sup>158</sup> The same source introduces these women as "Educated, pious, beautiful and accomplished" who "should have a gaggle of like-minded men waiting outside their doors."<sup>159</sup> But they do not: "Unfortunately, the few, if any, men who approach these women appear less than satisfactory." The implication is that their higher levels of education and their being career-oriented prevent them from marrying at an age when they would traditionally be considered most suitable for marriage; yet, by the time they feel prepared enough for marriage, Muslim men are no longer looking for them because of their age and because they are assumed to be (and perhaps many of them are) "too" career-focused. As Munira Ezzeldine, author of "Before the Wedding: 150 Questions for Muslims to Ask Before Getting Married," is quoted as having said, "We've been pushing young women to get educated and to get jobs, and now they're being penalized for

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<sup>158</sup> Kholoki-Kahf, "A Few Good Men."

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

their ambition.”<sup>160</sup> It also seems true that available Muslim men are likely to be uncomfortable with the idea of marrying women who are well-educated, ambitious, and have careers or are likely to work outside of the home: “while these men are impressed with a successful and active woman, they do not consider her ‘marriage material,’” Ezzeldine adds. “Despite the elevation of women, many men have maintained traditional ideas as to the type of wife they seek. After all, they do not see anything wrong with the way their mother was.”<sup>161</sup> As this statement suggests, these men do not find anything wrong with the expectations they have of potential wives, even as those expectations are a part of the reason why more Western Muslim women are remaining single as they grow older. Since these women are “too” focused on their education and career, available Muslim men turn to girls from “back home”: “young Muslim men appear to give up on them [the Western Muslim women] and marry from ‘back home’ or marry non-Muslims, making the pool of suitors even smaller.”<sup>162</sup> Marrying females from “back home,” a type of marriage called transnational marriage, is a common tradition among immigrants everywhere, not just Muslims, because it is a way for the family to maintain stronger ties with their native culture and with families and relatives. As Syma Muhammed, a Scottish Muslim woman of South Asian origins, writes in her article “Why British Muslim Women Struggle to Find a Marriage Partner”:

there has always been a tradition for British men originating from the Indian subcontinent to marry women from their country of origin. Families encourage their sons to do so for a host of reasons, including the cultural expectation that girls from "back home" will stay with and look after their in-laws.<sup>163</sup>

But while marrying women from “back home” is an option available to men, it is not the preferred choice of Muslim women born and/or raised in the West. Muhammed continues:

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2012/jan/18/british-muslim-women-marriage-struggle>

For Muslim women, marrying men from their country of origin is rarely considered an option as they tend to want social, economic and intellectual equals or superiors. Men from their country of origin tend to have different mindsets and struggle to find jobs no matter how well qualified they are, thereby leaving women as the main breadwinners. This situation can often create a strenuous dynamic in relationships with men from patriarchal cultures.<sup>164</sup>

Hence, because women want to marry someone who is either their social, economic, and intellectual equal or superior, their options are even more limited: they can only marry Muslim men who are raised in the same Western culture in which they are bred so that they are more mentally compatible with each other, be it due to issues of language barriers, cultural norms, or notions of gender and gender roles and rights. Research conducted on American Muslim communities also shows that 76% males would marry someone less intelligent or educated than themselves compared with only 18% of the females; 75% of the males said that they preferred a mate who was younger than themselves, whereas 94% of the females wanted an older mate.<sup>165</sup> When men marry women from back home, the marriages are not often unstable because these women generally tend to share the men's traditional expectations and ideas of gender roles; also, it is a commonly acceptable idea for the wife to rely on her husband for financial and other means, and if she does not know the language and culture of the West once she arrives here, her almost complete reliance on her husband is nothing unimaginable. But when western women marry men from back home, the marriages are often unstable due to their extreme differences and the idea of the husband's reliance on his wife is typically not respected.

The idea of women's higher education today and marriage at later ages proves that the problem of marriage among Western Muslims is unique, situated in a specific moment in history,

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Abdallah M. Badahada and Kathleen Tiemann. "Mate Selection Criteria among Muslims Living in America." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 26, no. 5 (2005): 433.

since they have been and are being taught the importance of education, career, economic empowerment, but these values do not come with learning what to do when they are ready to get married but cannot find suitable husbands. It seems as though the Western Muslim society is not ready to grasp the idea of women's educational, economic, and personal empowerment.

That women want to marry men who are either equal to them intellectually or are superior to them strongly supports the Islamic stipulation that women should marry either those who are equal to them or are above them, an idea referred to as *kafa'a*, or compatibility. Clearly, however, Muslim women understand *kafa'a* in terms of their levels of education, intellect, and understanding such that they seek partners who will share their egalitarian understanding of gender roles. When these women feel like their Muslim male counterparts in the West are not their equals or superiors, since the latter's expectations differ, it is worth proposing that *kafa'a* for them would be non-Muslim Western men—the People of the Book particularly, since marriage to them is permitted in the Qur'an.

#### *Re-evaluating Single Muslim Women's Options*

There appears to be a disconnect between Western Muslim women's and men's understanding of marriage and the preferred mate—the latter of which is shared by parents as well. Unmarried men's ideals generally seem to parallel their parents' generation's ideals and expectations of gender roles, while unmarried women in a distinct, more complicated space.

Thus, while not all Muslim women, whether in the West or elsewhere, necessarily want to get married, for those women who do, what options are available to them? Should they really be compelled to either stay single—until they find a suitable husband, if ever—or enter

polygamous marriages, as some British Muslim women are reportedly doing?<sup>166</sup> Or is it perhaps more appropriate to re-visit the ruling on whom Muslim women are allowed to marry, according to *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence? When Islam has traditionally and historically, until recently, been interpreted by men, issuing guidelines and mandating laws that have severe implications for women, such as the law that women may not marry non-Muslim men (Christians and Jews, among whom Muslim men are permitted to marry), it is perhaps worth arguing that women's experiences should be a legitimate and acceptable source of law. As Sa'diyya Shaikh writes,

My approach explicitly foregrounds how a group of Muslim women think and speak in relation to the text and engage God, ethics, and religion through the realities of their suffering and oppression. What they often emerge with is an understanding of Islam that provides a very different ethical and existential vision than that of traditional male scholars, their husbands, and clerics around them.<sup>167</sup>

Although Shaikh writes this in the context of violence against women and Qur'anic verse 4:34, her argument is much broader and can include any guidelines issued about women. In the case of interfaith marriages, then, as in the case of violent interpretations of verse 4:34, it can be argued that because Muslim women are the ones who experience the consequences of the injunction against marriage to non-Muslim men in a non-Muslim majority context, it is worth re-viewing this issue. Women's experiences and women's perspectives, thus, should be an accepted source of exegesis that helps depict the reality of the implementation of a certain ruling against them.

Indeed, one thing that Islamic feminists have generally thus far failed to address is precisely this issue of interfaith marriage for Muslim women in the West. Some Muslim authorities, such as imams and other community leaders, have discussed this issue and have even

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<sup>166</sup> Perminder Khatkar, "The British Muslim Men Who Love Both Their Wives." BBC Asian Network. Published September 26, 2011. Retrieved April 4, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15032947>.

<sup>167</sup> Sa'diyya Shaikh, "A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community." In *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religions: Roots and Cures*, ed. Daniel C. Maguire and Sa'diyya Shaikh (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 70.

argued in support of women's marriage to men from the People of the Book.<sup>168</sup> Among the few who have discussed this issue are Khaled Abou EL Fadl and Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, the latter of whom believes that, given Western Muslim women's situation, they may marry Christian and Jewish men. Abou El Fadl does not believe it is prohibited to do so, contrary to what the traditional jurists instituted; instead, he believes it to be *makruh*, or reprehensible, because, he observes, "the children of these Muslim/non-Muslim marriages in most cases do not grow up with a strong sense of their Islamic identity. It seems to me that in countries like the U.S. it is best for the children if they grow up with a Muslim father and mother."<sup>169</sup> Despite his opinion, he writes:

Surprising to me, all schools of thought prohibited a Muslim woman from marrying a man who is a kitabi (among the people of the book). I am not aware of a single dissenting opinion on this, which is rather unusual for Islamic jurisprudence because Muslim jurists often disagreed on many issues, but this is not one of them.<sup>170</sup>

Abdul Rauf recognizes that Muslim women's opportunities to find and marry Muslim men are reduced when Muslim men marry non-Muslim women simply because the latter are permitted to do so while the former are not.<sup>171</sup> He writes that religious scholars, both in the West and in traditional Muslim societies, are being forced to address this issue, which speaks to the depth of the problem, which is that there is a need to discuss more publicly the problem of marriage and the lack of available Muslim men for Muslim women. He supports the marriage of Muslim women to non-Muslim (Christian and Jewish) men, stating that not supporting inter-faith couples

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<sup>168</sup> Since the Qur'an prohibits both women and men from marrying polytheists or "disbelievers" (verse #), and men are explicitly permitted to marry women from the People of the Book (Christians and Jews), I am interested not in their marriage to "disbelievers" but to the People of the Book.

<sup>169</sup> "Fatwa by Dr. Abou El Fadl: On Christian Men Marrying Muslim Women." Scholar of the House. Accessed March 20, 2013. <http://www.scholarofthehouse.org/oninma.html>.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Rauf Abdul Feisal, *Moving the Mountain: Beyond Ground Zero to a New Vision of Islam in America* (New York, N.Y.: Free, 2012), 131.

where the female is a Muslim sends them the message that "the Muslim community can do nothing for them religiously," which would cause them to "flee, religiously, psychologically, and even physically, seeking out a justice of the peace for a civil ceremony."<sup>172</sup> He adds, "The choice I have made, and now promote, is to accept these couples, help them, and hope that they will help sustain and build our community."<sup>173</sup> He also suggests that this is because the Qur'an does not explicitly forbid such a marriage. Narrating the story of the Prophet's daughter Zaynab, who was married to a cousin before the Prophet received revelation and herself converted to Islam while her husband did not, Abdul Rauf reminds his Muslim readers that the Prophet never compelled her to leave her husband and never declared their marriage invalid.<sup>174</sup> Another Imam, Imam W. D. Mohammed, has also advised Muslim women that "if one [can]not find a good Muslim to marry, it is better to marry a 'decent Christian' than to never marry."<sup>175</sup>

A part of the issue that Abdul Rauf acknowledges is that in the West, particularly in Great Britain, polygamy is being revived,<sup>176</sup> and Muslim women are turning to polygamous marriages because they are unable to find suitable single Muslim men—and tradition prohibits marriage among them and non-Muslims. According to a March 2012 article in the Daily Mail, the Islamic Sharia Council reveals that some career Muslim women are "even choosing to become second or third wives to married men" because of the lack of suitable men.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>175</sup> Jamilah Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah* (New York: New York UP, 2009), 151.

<sup>176</sup> Perminder Khatkar, "The British Muslim Men Who Love Both Their Wives." BBC Asian Network. Published September 26, 2011. Accessed April 4, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15032947>.

<sup>177</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, "High-flying Muslim career women willing to 'share husbands' because of a lack of suitable men." Mail Online. Published March 11, 2012. Retrieved April 4, 2012. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2113366/Muslim-women-share-husbands-lack-suitable-men.html>>

Islamic feminists do address the issue of interfaith marriages where the wife is Muslim, but till date, no comprehensive study exists on the problem, a study that covers the historical, theological, and social implications of this prohibition and also re-interprets the institution of marriage from a contemporary viewpoint that sees husbands and wives as equals of each other. In her "Introduction to Muslim Women's Rights," Azizah al-Hibri acknowledges that "new circumstances warrant a reexamination of the traditional juristic permission for the Muslim male to enter into interfaith marriages," but she does not present the issue beyond the traditional prohibition.<sup>178</sup> The jurists feared, she writes, that interfaith marriages where the wife was Muslim "would result in the effective denial of the Muslim wife's right to the free exercise of her religion."<sup>179</sup> These teachings are no longer universally accepted and are certainly not upheld by Westerners or Western Muslims; if the provided reasons are no longer true, then the premise, which is not grounded in the Qur'an in the first, also cannot be true.

Western Muslim women have Islamic grounds to support their expectations and standards in potential spouses: they can appeal to the Islamic concept of *kafa'a* to marry men with whom they feel compatible. It is obvious that the concept of *kafa'a* exists in order that the wife may be in a marriage she finds fulfilling. While historically, the concern was more economic and tribalistic, and racial, today, the concern is more about education, intellect, and the idea of a personal culture that members of a given culture share with each other. Since Western Muslim men do not share the culture—that is, the same understanding of issues important to Western Muslim women, such as education and career—it can seem that non-Muslim Western

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<sup>178</sup> Azizah al-Hibri, "An Introduction to Muslim Women's Rights" in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2000), 69.

<sup>179</sup> Al-Hibri, 68.

men would be her most suitable, most compatible spouse, and marriage with them would prevent Muslim women from marrying beneath their level of *kafa'a* as they understand it.

## **Conclusion**

From the above Qur'anic verses, commentaries, hadiths, and Muslim discussions on marriage and the ideal spouse, we can conclude that the ideal husband is a pious, righteous, and kind Muslim man who recognizes and fulfills his responsibility as the caretaker of his wife and family. He is masculine in that he does not assume the manners of women. The ideal wife, in turn, is a pious, righteous, and obedient woman who respects her husband and recognizes and fulfills her responsibility as the nurturer of her children. This latter expectation, however, that of the wife as the nurturer in fact enters the marriage discourse in Islamic history in more modern times, since her sexual duties override her maternal and domestic duties in classical jurisprudence. While these gendered expectations are still espoused by Western Muslim men, Western Muslim women have different expectations differently. The female bloggers and commenters, as shown above, are generally in their mid- or late-20s and are seeking husbands who will respect their decision to work and/or continue their education; while they are not all entirely opposed to the idea of being housewives or conforming to traditional gender roles, they expect to have the option of working available to them so as to be able to exert their own agency when they will it. The men (and their parents), however, generally seem to prefer younger women who are not “too” educated and who appreciate their traditional domestic gender roles. This conflict in expectations and standards hence leads to a lack of suitable partners for the women—and not as much for the men, since they, if immigrant or relatives of immigrants, can enter transnational marriages.

Due to the tension in the differences between Western Muslim women's expectations of their potential husbands and those of Western Muslim men's in their potential wives, there is a lack of available suitable partners for women particularly. The dilemma is not shared by men because they, generally, prefer more traditional wives and can—and do—therefore marry females from their or their parents' native countries.

### **CHAPTER 3: Individual Choice and Parental Authority in Western Muslim Marriages**

A major component of this study is that of the issue of individual choice and parental authority and the conflict between the two. Since a majority of the Muslims in the West are immigrants or children of immigrants, culture plays a significant role in how the concept of marriage is perceived as well as how marriages are conducted. In countries or regions where arranged marriages are the norm, for example, such as throughout South Asia, the custom of arranged marriages is then shared by both Muslims and non-Muslims of the area, and many of them also transfer that custom with them during migration as well. As such, the most common method of marriage among South Asians, whether Muslim or non-Muslim but particularly Muslims, is arranged marriage, which is often justified religiously as well as culturally: according to Muslim tradition, the mixing of opposite genders is prohibited, and when a male and a female want to meet, be it to determine if they want to marry each other, they must be accompanied by an adult.

Courtship ideas and modes of mate selection are shifting among Western Muslims in ways that they are neither entirely “Western” (e.g., dating is still a taboo in the Muslim community) nor entirely “traditional” as their parents might understand them (e.g., Western Muslim women are getting married at later ages and enjoy a strong say in whom they marry). Even if not traditionally arranged or forced, Muslim marriages in the West still, for the most part, take place between couples of the same faith and often of the same ethnicity or race. Still, there are certain methods of mate selection that Western Muslims readily participate in and adopt in order to find a spouse.

This chapter surveys three main methods of mate selection and matchmaking among Western Muslims and explores the issue of individual choice and parental authority in such

marriages. These methods are: participating in marriage events initiated for the purpose of helping Muslims meet potential spouses; relying on services offered at the mosques and other Islamic centers, such as imams informing interested individuals about particular community members seeking partners; and turning to matchmaking Internet sites to find potential partners.

### **3.1 Methods of Mate Selection**

Younger generations of Western Muslims generally perceive of marriage the way non-Muslims westerners do. Although children and grandchildren of Muslim immigrants often claim that they are culture-free in the West and it is therefore more feasible for them to practice Islam without the cultural ideals in Muslim societies, it is precisely because of Western culture that it is possible for them to practice Islam that is less influenced by Muslim cultures. How the younger generation of Muslims gets married, choose their partners, obtain divorce, and understand marriage is thus similar to non-Muslim Westerners.<sup>180</sup>

Since a majority of the Muslims in the West are immigrants or children and grandchildren of immigrants, one of the main modes of mate selection among them remains to be familial ties or networks, and transnational marriages are the norm for males. For females, transnational marriages are not as common, as discussed earlier. Arranged and transnational marriages are conducted between two people of the same linguistic and ethnic background.<sup>181</sup> But there are different types of marriages, and each takes place differently, as Denise Johar's study concludes: arranged, self-initiated, and self-achieved.<sup>182</sup> Arranged marriages are those in

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<sup>180</sup> Frank Cox, *Human Intimacy: Marriage, the Family, and Its Meaning* (Wadsworth, 2013), 152.

<sup>181</sup> Denise Al-Johar. "Muslim Marriages in America: Reflecting New Identities." *The Muslim World* 95, no. 4 (2005): 562. Johar, 556.

<sup>182</sup> Al-Johar, 562.

which a partner is chosen for someone by her/his parents, relatives, or family friends; more than a third of the marriages in al-Johar's study were arranged marriages involving Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, and Indians in Houston, Texas.<sup>183</sup> Such marriages often endogamous, and preference is given to one's ethnic background. While al-Johar's study shows the prevalence of arranged marriages among South Asians, perhaps because her study is based in a city with a significant South Asian population, other research shows that arranged marriages among Arab immigrants are also common, such as in Detroit—the American city with the largest Arab population<sup>184</sup>—and dating remains a taboo.<sup>185</sup> Still, other research also shows that South Asians tend to marry endogamously within their own ethnic groups not just in America but also in Britain.<sup>186</sup> In al-Johar's work, in self-initiated unions in which Islamic principles are followed—such as notifying parents, having chaperoned meetings before the *nikah*, and waiting for family approval—preference is given to one's religious identity and not so much to one's ethnic or cultural identity, and they often take place between Muslims from different linguistic or ethnic backgrounds.<sup>187</sup> Self-achieved marriages are “exogamous marriages to initially non-Muslim Europeans and Hispanic Americans,” some of whom later convert to Islam; such unions are associated with one's American identity more so than with one's religious or linguistic identities, dating takes place freely, and family and relatives are rarely consulted.<sup>188</sup> Eight out of twenty-seven informants in al-Johar's study had a self-achieved marriage.<sup>189</sup> Also, in self-achieved and self-initiated marriages, the partners are much closer to each other in age than they are in

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<sup>183</sup> Al-Johar, 562.

<sup>184</sup> "Arab American Population Highlights." Arab American Institute Foundation. Published 2006. Accessed April 20, 2013. [http://aai.3cdn.net/9298c231f3a79e30c6\\_g7m6bx9hs.pdf](http://aai.3cdn.net/9298c231f3a79e30c6_g7m6bx9hs.pdf).

<sup>185</sup> Andrew Shryock, “Kinship and Community in Arab Detroit,” in *Arab Detroit*, 584.

<sup>186</sup> Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 140.

<sup>187</sup> Al-Johar, 569.

<sup>188</sup> Al-Johar, 572.

<sup>189</sup> Al-Johar, 571

arranged marriages. Overall, the younger generation expresses discontent with the custom of satisfying relatives, which includes marrying people chosen or at least approved by family relatives; this, informants in al-Johar's study say, limits their choices in the Muslim world whereas in America, there are more options available because of the diversity.<sup>190</sup>

There are also those marriages that take place in response to a child's "rebelliousness" in particular and out of the parents' fear of Western influence in general. Al-Johar's study finds that marriage among immigrants is also perceived as a solution to potentially "rebellious" adolescent behavior, and teenage marriages are thus common. Marriage is also perceived as a solution to potentially "rebellious" adolescent behavior, and teenage marriages are thus common.<sup>191</sup> Immigrant parents fear that their children, especially daughters, might become "westernized" and abandon their cultural and religious beliefs; as such, they are "married off" at young ages before migration to America. Young daughters are married prior to being brought along to the U.S. because "other people" tell "the newly-arrived parents that the girl would become Americanized and start smoking."<sup>192</sup> Pre-immigration marriage takes place despite the disapproval of the girls.<sup>193</sup> Since "most British parents regard it as part of their religious duty to find a suitable life partner for their son or daughter," Gilliat-Ray writes, the family has the dominant role in finding the partner and as such, "the choice of spouse is a matter of family concern."<sup>194</sup> Parents and family prefer and often expect to have their children, both sons and daughters, marry blood relatives, the children, especially females. This is because, from the parents' standpoint, marriages to blood relatives "are widely regarded as being potentially more secure, not only

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<sup>190</sup> Al-Johar, 571.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Al-Johar, 560-561.

<sup>193</sup> Al-Johar, 561.

<sup>194</sup> Gilliat-Ray, 140.

because the credentials and reputation of the prospective husband and wife are usually well-known and verifiable, but also because the young people involved are seen as potentially more compatible as a result of their shared origins."<sup>195</sup> Traditionally arranged and forced marriages are more feasible for recent immigrants who have not adopted to their host Western country, but once the family has settled here for some time, it becomes more difficult for families to pressure their children to marry overseas.

The children's understanding of compatibility, which differs from their parents' significantly, prevent them from agreeing to marry people from "back home." They have thus started to contest parental authority in marriage and prefer to marry someone who was raised with them in the West. These children, as second or third generation of Muslims, tend to define compatibility in terms of origin and individual culture. Young British Muslim girls, for example, are "more cautious about the prospect of a happy marriage as a result of marrying a spouse from [their parents' native countries], regardless of whether or not they [are] related."<sup>196</sup> As an informant says in a study on British Muslims, "I would like to marry someone in Britain because he'd be more like you and would understand you better. But someone in Pakistan—since they have grown up in a totally different society—maybe you'll find it difficult to get along with them."<sup>197</sup> The individual, in-between culture of these children of immigrants, therefore, is more important to them than the native culture of their parents, a culture that they cannot claim as their own because they did not grow up in it.

The contrast between the parents' expectations or their role in their children's mate selection and the children's preferences is further marked by the parents' belief that Muslims

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<sup>195</sup> Gilliat-Ray, 141.

<sup>196</sup> Gilliat-Ray, 141.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

born and raised in the West are “too strong-willed” and are thus not likely to have a successful marriage:

The implication is that in marriage it is necessary for at least one party to compromise, and some view young women raised in Britain as less likely to ‘adjust’ as girls are traditionally advised. Residence in Britain can thus be viewed as eroding gendered difference, damaging the complementarity between husband and wife, and leading to potential conflict.<sup>198</sup>

While it is necessary for at least one party to compromise, compromising is traditionally expected of the wife, not of the husband; as briefly discussed earlier, girls born and/or raised in the West are believed to be incapable of maintaining a successful marriage precisely because they are believed to be influenced by Western ideals of marriage, which differ from traditional Muslim marriage ideals. Parents and men, generally, thus prefer a wife who is “simple”<sup>199</sup> and from “back home,” with a strong sense of both culture and religion; “several young women,” too, believe that “British Pakistani boys were lacking in terms of work ethic, religious practice or values.”<sup>200</sup> The assumptions therefore go both ways.

Generally, marriages among Western Muslims can be arranged by family or friends, through match-making services, and/or through an imam, or a religious community leader. A Muslim woman who appears to be “a pious [M]uslim woman living in the west” asks on Yahoo! Answers, “How do [M]uslim women find a husband?”<sup>201</sup> She writes, “If you're a pious [M]uslim woman living in the west and you want to find someone who is like-minded, how do you find him? Especially if your parents are not very sociable (if they are, say, career-orientated) so you

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<sup>198</sup> Katharine Charsley, “Risk, Trust, Gender, and Transnational Marriage among British Pakistanis.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 6 (2007): 1124.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> “How do Muslim Women Find a Husband?” Yahoo! Answers. Posted June 2012. Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://uk.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120611182855AAoQ4ZF>.

can't rely on them much either. What age range do most successful men prefer?" The responses she receives vary in the preferred methods by each individual, but most suggest the Internet. The answer chosen as the "Best Answer," for example, includes in its response, "There are some new upcoming sites which allow halal manners/ways to choose and look for a spouse online e.g. purematrimony.com is one such site."<sup>202</sup> Another respondent shares her experience of having met her husband at her workplace:

It was at my work place when my husband-to-be saw me and proposed marriage. He found out about me first, by talking with workmates about my character. He really liked that I wore hijab and never missed my prayers. Once I heard that he was interested in me, I found out about him, told my dad, I told him to talk to others and see if they knew him. And all I heard were good things about him. I had made a list on what I wanted in a partner. e.g. A good [m]uslim, prays 5times a day, patient, respects my mother even though she's not [m]uslim, etc. Alhamduillah he is all that.<sup>203</sup>

Other individuals suggest turning to imams and community Muslim centers, relatives, neighbors; a couple of them advise her to start with a sincere prayer so that God may guide her to finding a suitable match. Similar advice is posed to another female who asks on a Muslim forum, "How to find a Muslim husband?"<sup>204</sup> Respondents suggest mosques, friends and relatives, and networking with others. One member stated, "those matrimonial websites are a HUGE [original emphasis] fitnah. [A]void them at all [cost]."<sup>205</sup>

The responses to the question asked by these females also suggest that there are at least three different major ways of finding a partner: arranged marriages or matchmaking done by

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Answer posted by Pacific Blue Islam. Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> "How to Find a Muslim Husband?" Muslim Forum. Posted July 28, 2009. Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://www.islamicboard.com/new-muslims/134285397-how-find-muslim-husband.html>.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid, comment posted by Convert. <http://www.islamicboard.com/new-muslims/134285397-how-find-muslim-husband.html#post1193205>

family and/or other close associates, discussed above; imams and community center involvement; and internet services. One option that no one suggested to her in their answers is marriage events. The section below thus focuses on marriage events created by Muslims for other Muslims to find husbands or wives, the role of imams and other community leaders in helping singles find partners, and online match-making services.

### *Marriage Events*

Traditional introduction routes, whether leading to marriages arranged by family or to self-arranged marriages, do not prove effective for most Western Muslim women. This is primarily because of their age, which is either in the late 20s or early 30s at the time they seek marriage partners, and/or their desire to work and live career-oriented lives. Since they are older than traditionally preferred, their families have a hard time arranging their marriage; as such, they set out to find their own partners—and struggle in the process due to the lack of available husbands. Desiring their successful marriages, their parents seem to approve of the various means through which these older single Western Muslim females attempt to find their spouse. Syma Mohammed, for example, the Scottish Muslim of Pakistani origin cited earlier, writes about her experience of attending a Muslim marriage event in Glasgow “a few years ago, at the behest of [her] mother”: “These are events where Muslim men and women meet for the purpose of seeking an ideal marriage partner. At the event, there were around five women to every man. Well-turned-out women sat around dejected, twiddling their thumbs, waiting to speak to the select few.”<sup>206</sup> The average age of the women at these events, she writes, tends to be in the early 30s while that of men’s is in the late 20s. Marriage events are reportedly on a rise because of

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<sup>206</sup> Syma Mohammed, “Why British Muslim Women Struggle to Find a Marriage Partner,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2012/jan/18/british-muslim-women-marriage-struggle>

“familial and community introductions declining,” “Muslim divorce rates rising, and the desire for more say in finding one's life partner increasing.”<sup>207</sup> Muslim Marriage Events is an initiative in the UK that launched in 2009 to help British Muslims find marriage partners.<sup>208</sup> The business, founded and run by Muhammad [no last name provided] “grew out of Muhammad's own frustration at finding a Muslim woman to marry. The 34-year-old from Yorkshire eventually met his wife, Nazia, on SingleMuslim.com but decided to help others like him by setting up an event firm.”<sup>209</sup> Because of the lack of available partners for Western Muslims, the business is rather popular: “So high is the appetite for an event such as this that attendees have come from across the UK, with one man crossing the English Channel from France, and others driving for up to five hours for their date with destiny.”<sup>210</sup>

Muslim Marriage Events also decided to serve American Muslims for the first time in 2012, according to a Facebook event created for it; two different marriage events were organized for single Muslims, one for “professional Muslims” on February 18 and the other for “Practicing Muslims” on February 19, 2012. However, both events were cancelled because:

Dear Registrants,

As you have been informed via email, the marriage events are canceled for the time being due to the fact that we want to ensure quality and because the male/female ratio was largely unequal, we aren't able to hold these events as we don't want to do a disservice to you. However, stay tuned in case there is another opportunity inshaAllah.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Mary Murtagh, “Muslims in the UK Try a Western Approach to Matchmaking.” The National. Published February 8, 2011. Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/europe/muslims-in-the-uk-try-a-western-approach-to-matchmaking>.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Facebook Event: <http://www.facebook.com/events/157074671069694/>

Since Western Muslim men still have the option of marrying overseas, they are generally not the ones facing the problem, and they therefore do not need marriage events to find partners. In order for marriage events to be successful, both genders have to be equally motivated to find suitable partners—and they have to be assured of the possibility that they will encounter compatible Muslim men. Still, that the events were cancelled because of a lack of interest, as concluded by the unequal ratio, does not, however, mean that there was indeed not enough interest: it is rather more likely that there was not enough awareness of the events, particularly because this was the first time the events were taking place outside of the UK, where they have been taking place for over three years.

#### *Imams, Islamic Centers and Communities, and Single Muslims Seeking Marriage*

Many mosques and Islamic centers throughout the West offer services for single Muslims who are looking to get married. Imam Mohamed Magid of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society in Sterling, VA, and his wife have recently “started something new: required premarital counseling for people who marry at the mosque.”<sup>212</sup> His wife heads a program that helps Muslims “cut to the chase” in the marital process. In circles and discussions with Muslims, they discuss what the “modern” interpretation of a *wali* is, what the couple thinks the characteristics of a “modern” Muslim woman and man living in America should be, and how they understand marriage. A “commonly discussed problem is the surplus of single Muslim women,” which “stems partly from Islamic practice's broader acceptance of men marrying outside the faith than women.” Daisy Khan, wife of an Imam in New York, who organizes events for singles during Valentine's

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<sup>212</sup> Michelle Bornstein. "Muslims Try to Balance Traditions, U.S. Culture on Path to Marriage." *The Washington Post* (Maryland), May 27, 2008, B05. Also available at [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2008-05-27/news/36877428\\_1\\_muslim-women-interfaith-marriage-african-american-muslims](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2008-05-27/news/36877428_1_muslim-women-interfaith-marriage-african-american-muslims)

Day, therefore believes that because the ratio of single Muslim women to single Muslim men is too high, "pious" Muslim women should be allowed to marry "pious" non-Muslim men.<sup>213</sup>

Often, events and services offered by Islamic community centers are not the preferred method of finding partners because “[c]ommunity institutions such as mosques, Islamic Centres and Weekend Islamic School are often strictly segregated between genders, thus making it impossible for free interaction and socialization between genders.”<sup>214</sup> The annual Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) convention, which also offers a matrimonial service, for example, is considered to be conservative: “ISNA does it in a pretty conservative way. There are other paki /desi [Pakistani/South Asian] matrimonial speed dating services that are a bit more casual and up beat with their events,” writes a South Asian Muslim American on a Pakistani forum who goes by the ID “njgal”,<sup>215</sup> she does not mention what the other events are, where they take place, or how they are “a bit more casual and up beat [sic].”

Still, according to its website, “ISNA Matrimonials is a US based matrimonial website designed to cater to the needs of Muslims in North America that are searching for marriage partners. This website provides a secure Islamic platform for single Muslims and/or their parents to create a profile and interact with other members in this database.”<sup>216</sup> In place since 1985, the service “has been the subject of numerous jokes by some,” but “this method of seeking marriage is much more acceptable than going at it alone.”<sup>217</sup> As Obaid Siddiqui writes about his

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Taimoor Aziz and Mbaye Lo, "Muslim Marriage Goes Online: the Use of Internet Matchmaking by American Muslims." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 21, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>215</sup> "My Experience at ISNA Matrimonial Event Last Year." Pakistani Forum. Comment posted October 17, 2009. Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://www.paklinks.com/gs/life-and-relationships/362252-my-experience-at-isna-matrimonial-event-last-year.html#post6898861>.

<sup>216</sup> ISNA Matrimonials Homepage. Accessed April 28, 2013. <http://www.isnamatrimonials.net/Matrimonial/>

<sup>217</sup> "How ISNA Matrimonial Service Works." Sound Vision. Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://www.soundvision.com/Info/Islam/mar.isna.asp>

experience at the 2012 ISNA convention on Patheos.com, “If you were one of the hundreds of single Muslims at the convention, it was a weekend-long race and competition to accumulate as many new dating/marriage options as possible. Because let’s face the truth – under the guise of religious learning, single Muslims converge on the largest national annual Islamic conference for one reason only: to meet that Muslim someone.”<sup>218</sup> ISNA’s matrimonial event in 2012 was called “Journey Together – An Event for Marriage-Minded Individuals,” as posted on Facebook. According to its description, “Journey Together is excited to announce our first matrimonial event to be held on Sunday August 26th, 2012 at ISNA. Please keep this date free. We have non traditional interactive activities planned, such as: Ice-Breakers Speed Meeting Group Sessions.”<sup>219</sup> Participants were allowed, but not necessarily encouraged, to bring their guardians with them; the event cost twenty-five dollars for participants and fifteen dollars for guardians.<sup>220</sup>

### *Muslim Marriages Online*

One of the most non-conventional matchmaking processes today available to single Western Muslims is online matrimonial services. Prior to the discourse on freedom and women’s rights, “the assumption was that anyone who would turn to a computer for love had to be a desperate loner who was unable to establish a normal relationship.”<sup>221</sup> Moreover, since women outnumber men in America by 51 to 49 percent, many women are compelled to look for other non-traditional means of meeting potential spouses. As such, there has been a “rapid growth” of online matrimonial sites, “complementing matrimonial pages in the Muslim/Asian press,”

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<sup>218</sup> Obaid Siddiqui, "Looking for Love and Finding Awkwardness at ISNA." Patheos: Hosting the Conversation on Faith. Published September 10, 2012. Accessed April 20, 2013.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/author/altmuslimguest/>.

<sup>219</sup> "Journey Together - An Event for Marriage-Minded Individuals." Event created by Sherry Qureshy, *et al.*

<https://www.facebook.com/events/512855992074673/>.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Aziz and Lo. "Muslim Marriage Goes Online."

indicating that rates of “‘approved’ marriage are likely to grow as [Western] Muslims purposefully use the internet to seek their own partners, alongside, or in preference to, conventional parentally initiated ‘arranged’ marriages. The web provides an apparently ‘halal’ space for single Muslims to become acquainted with potential marriage partners.”<sup>222</sup>

A major reason behind Muslims’ turning to the Internet to find their spouses, one study suggests, is that the individuals seek to overcome existing spatial and cultural barriers,<sup>223</sup> implying, it seems, that there is a growing tolerance towards inter-racial marriages among Muslims today. When other methods of mate selection, such as arranged marriages, familial networks, and marriage events fail or do not appeal to some Muslims, the Internet becomes a preferred alternative. No longer a taboo, internet match-making is becoming a popular and socially accepted method for mate selection particularly in response to gender segregation in mosques, schools, and other institutions where it would be practical for Muslims to meet and interact with potential partners.<sup>224</sup>

A study on online matchmaking sites for Muslims observes that there are three major categories of online matchmaking and dating: regionally or communally-based sites and mailing lists that cater to like-minded groups and local communities; pro bono sites that provide match-making services for the public good; and specialized commercial sites.<sup>225</sup> The first category “depends on individual blogs, mailing lists and Internet correspondence.” The Muslim Alliance of North America (MANA), a Muslim organization “committed to Muslim issues and concerns that impact indigenous Muslims, particularly African Americans,” adopted a project of healthy

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<sup>222</sup> Gilliat-Ray, 142.

<sup>223</sup> Aziz and Lo.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

marriage in 2005 called the Marriage Initiative. The project seeks "to help masjids and Muslim communities build and maintain healthy marriages."<sup>226</sup> The second category, the pro bono sites created for the public good, "provide their services in exchange for either small fees, or as a free public service within their socio-cultural mission."<sup>227</sup> ISNA, the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), and Islam-online are three examples of the second category. ISNA's Matrimonials are the largest programs of this type, as ISNA is the largest Muslim organization in the United States. The two matrimonial programs under ISNA are Islamic Horizons' Matrimonial Ads and the online ISNA Matrimonials, the latter of which has been discussed earlier. Islamic Horizons, a by-monthly publication, is "reaching out to over 250,000 readers."<sup>228</sup> The two programs appear to be different only in terms of demographics: the demography of ISNA's online matrimonial site "is larger and more diverse, consisting primarily of Muslims. As stated on its front page, it is 'designed to cater to the needs of Muslims in North America that are searching for marriage partners.'<sup>229</sup> The third category, the study finds, is specialized commercial sites, which are "sites that provide matchmaking services for commercial purposes."<sup>230</sup> While these sites vary in terms of the target audience and their demographics, the one factor common to them is that they are all targeting single Muslims. Because marriages between Muslim men and non-Muslim women are recognized by the Muslim community, these websites also allow non-Muslim women to participate, although non-Muslim women are not prohibited from joining, either.<sup>231</sup>

With different types of marriages, ranging from traditionally arranged to self-initiated love marriages, Western Muslims, particularly women, have multiple means of finding suitable

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, as quoted in the study.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

partners. The problem, however, is that the ratio of the men to women interested in seeking a suitable mate is low, which has led to the canceling of marriage events in the U.S. Internet matchmaking, however, seems to be the most preferred way of finding a partner, but there is not enough research to determine how successful this search actually is. Nonetheless, what is clear is that as Muslim women grow older, they enjoy more authority in finding their spouses, particularly because the parents realize that the families they know are traditional and prefer younger females for their sons and other male family members for marriage.

### **3.2 Individual Choice and Parental Authority**

Islam discourages—or, according to some Muslims, forbids—gender mixing because it is believed that it can lead to *fitnah*, or social chaos marked primarily by fornication, adultery. As such, while forced marriages according to contemporary Muslims do not have a place in Islam, meetings that take place between two individuals interested in marrying each other must be supervised by adult family members from either or both sides. Traditionally, females must have the consent of a *wali*, or male figure such as a father or a community leader, in order to get married to someone of their choice; this is not necessary according to Hanafi law, however. Interestingly, while South Asian Muslims follow the Hanafi School of law, they still require the consent of a *wali*, and most of their marriages are arranged. Since South Asians are reportedly the largest population of immigrant Muslims in the West, and marriage manuals that discourage individual choice in marriage remain valuable among them, it is fair to conclude that South Asian couples generally tend to exhibit less individual choice in their marriages than non-South Asian Muslims. This conclusion is also supported by studies that analyze marriage ads and matrimonial sites particularly those from the ISNA programs. A previously cited study notes, for

example, “Since ISNA's dominant membership is South Asian Muslims from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, ... traditional modes of supervised courtship characterize these sites.”<sup>232</sup> South Asian parents utilize these sites to “maintain continuity with their homeland's traditions by reaching out back home to look for ‘ideal’ marriage candidates for their American-born sons or daughters.”<sup>233</sup> In the study’s survey of 100 randomly selected profiles from ISNA's Matrimonial, the researchers found that “all but five profiles were posted by parents.... Although ISNA represents an umbrella organization for all North American Muslims, no profile was posted by anyone outside the triangle of Pakistan, India or Bangladesh.”<sup>234</sup>

Young Muslims who are now learning that their consent is required in marriages chosen for them by their parents express relief at this individual right: “Finally puts my mind at rest!” writes one Muslim male in an online community in which a member shares an article on the issue of individual consent in marriages.<sup>235</sup> The thread is titled “Do Parents Have a Right to Choose Their Child’s Marriage Partner?” The main support that the article provides for its argument is that of a hadith:

Abu Huraira (Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as having said: A woman without a husband must not be married until she is consulted, and a virgin must not be married until her permission is sought. They asked the Prophet of Allah (may peace be upon him): How can her (the virgin's) consent be solicited? He (the Holy Prophet) said: That she keeps silent.<sup>236</sup>

Other sources, such as Abdur Rahman on an Internet article called “Marriage” on an educational website on Islam, claim that the Qur’an forbids forced marriages and requires the consent of both

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<sup>232</sup> Aziz and Lo.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> “Do Parents Have a Right to Choose Their Child's Marriage Partner?” Muslim Forum. Comment posted October 30, 2009. Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?224335-Do-Parents-Have-A-Right-To-Choose-Their-Child-s-Marriage-Partner&p=3433745&viewfull=1#post3433745>

<sup>236</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, “The Book of Marriage,” Book 8, Hadith Number 3303.

partners: “The consent of both the man and the women is an essential element of marriage, and the Qur'an gives women a substantial role in choosing their own life partners. It lays down: Do not prevent them from marrying their husbands when they agree between themselves in a lawful manner. (2: 232)”<sup>237</sup> He acknowledge, however, that not all schools of law agree that this verse requires the consent of females: “Imam Malik... gives a slightly restrictive interpretation to this verse and makes the choice of partner by a Muslim girl subject to the over-ruling power or *ijbar* of her father or guardian in the interests of the girl herself.”<sup>238</sup> While Abdur Rahman attributes Imam Malik’s reasoning to the “immaturity or over-zealousness” of girls, which may cause a girl to want to marry “a man about whom she has distorted information or who does not possess good character or who lacks proper means of livelihood,” he adds:

In such a case, it is better, or rather incumbent upon the girl's father or guardian, that, in the wider interests of the girl, he restrains her from marrying such a worthless man and finds a suitable person to be her husband. Generally speaking, such marriages arranged by fathers and guardians work better than a marriage brought about through western courtship.<sup>239</sup>

The source fails to acknowledge that males, too, are prone to making the mistake of rushing into marriage due to their “over-zealousness” and “immaturity.” Yet, this remains the most oft-cited reason behind the necessity, if not requirement, of parental involvement in Muslim marriages. Western Muslims, however, commonly criticize their parents' understanding and practice of Islam and challenge their parental/familial authority in mate selection.<sup>240</sup> This is because some

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<sup>237</sup> Abdur Rahman, "Marriage." Islam Tomorrow. Accessed March 20, 2013.  
<http://www.islamtomorrow.com/women/marriage.htm>.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Santi Rozario and Geoffrey Samuel, “Islam, Love, and Marriage: New Choices for a New World.” In *Body, Health and Religion Research Group (BAHAR)*, Cardiff University Research Paper No.1 January 2011, 5.

parents tend to abuse their role as their children's guardians and often focus on their children's partners' ethnic, racial, and/or linguistic background rather than on their religious background.<sup>241</sup> Muslim Western parents, specifically immigrants, "have often worked very hard to establish their families in the West, are attached to values that seem conservative, old-fashioned and irrelevant, but the society around them also seems alien and unfriendly."<sup>242</sup> In particular, young women looking to get married are also critical of their parents' understanding of traditional gender roles, which the younger generation Muslims believe are influenced by "culture" and are not "Islamic"; as such, parents are likely to dismiss a potential partner for their child because they expect a "traditional" Muslim husband or wife of the same ethnic or linguistic origin for their children. As some studies show, in terms of marriage, specifically among Bangladeshi British Muslims,

basic principles of the patriarchal family and of its authority over women in particular have however remained unchanged. Within this context, while urban educated women may very well enjoy a certain amount of autonomy in terms of their physical mobility, when time comes for marriage, they are still subjected to norms and values not all that different from their sisters in the rural areas. Thus, while for women the pressure to get married at a certain age remains, they are also now concerned about finding a dependable, secure husband within the chaotic, uncertain modern [western] world within which they are now living.<sup>243</sup>

However, I maintain that in many cases, females reject proposals with which they are dissatisfied, if they have a choice in the marriage, until they and their families reach a point at which the parents allow them to choose their own partners or encourage them to get married via whatever means possible.

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<sup>241</sup> "Do Parents Have a Right to Choose Their Child's Marriage Partner?" Muslim Forum. Comment posted October 30, 2009. Accessed April 20, 2013.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 13.

## Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter shifts from Muslim women's dilemma alone to the Western Muslim youth problem of marriage: the youth, including males, believe they are more "Islamic" than their parents are and therefore do not always agree with their parents' choice of marriage for them. It looks like, however, that the male and the female youth both believe this before they reach the age of marriage, but when the men are getting married, their first choice is not the Western Muslim woman. At this moment in the discussion of Western Muslim marriages, there arises a gap in what Western Muslim men believe about marriage and their ideal potential spouse before they pursue marriage and once they start pursuing it.<sup>244</sup>

It appears that with the non-traditional modes of mate selection and matchmaking discussed above, more authority and choices are given to older Muslims, both women and men, seeking partners. In marriages that take place among younger Muslims, however, there seems to be more parental involvement, although not necessarily always a lack of individual choice. It seems plausible to conclude that as people grow older and their options for potential mates reduce, they and their families are more willing to accept non-conventional modes of finding partners, such as via the Internet and marriage events; the parents are also more likely to allow their children to have more control over whom they marry.

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<sup>244</sup> The participants in Grewal's study, for example, are mostly addressing the question of whom they *will* marry or whether their parents *will* have a say in or authority over whom they marry; it's not about who they are married to or who they are looking to marry.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The marriage of the Pashtun couple whose wedding was referenced in the Introduction exhibits a couple of the major themes surveyed throughout the study. The fact that the marriage took place between two individuals originally from different countries but same ethnicity suggests that it was a self-initiated marriage, which is to say that it was done in a way that the couple understood as fully Islamic by notifying their families and seeking approval. They must have seen themselves as compatible for each other as well, since despite their families' being from separate countries, the couple grew up in the United States and therefore shares a certain sense of culture with each other, certain experiences that they likely would not share with someone from their native countries. Lastly, that other Pashtun families felt uneasy about the union and that the parents created a narrative illustrate strongly the concept of individual choice and parental authority and what immigrant parents find problematic about it.

When discussing the issue of Muslim marriages, it is imperative to understand the role of marriage in Muslims' lives particularly as taught by Islam. Muslims generally consider marriage an essential part of life, and take seriously the prophetic statement that "marriage is half of one's *deen*." As such, that a large population of Western Muslims, especially women, finds it difficult to get married is a serious dilemma. The purpose of this study was therefore to introduce this problem, evaluate the different but limited options available to Western Muslim women seeking marriage, and analyze the issues of parental authority and individual choice in mate selection. This discussion includes generational conflicts between immigrant Muslim parents and their children; as immigrant Muslim parents strive to maintain their native cultures and their traditional understanding of Islam, their children and grandchildren are exposed to different, or

what they consider more “authentic,” understandings of Islam that assure them their parents’ Islam is more influenced by “culture,” and their parents’ practice of Islam, they believe, is therefore less authentic than their own. Specifically in terms of marriage and mate selection, then, their parents have different expectations and preferences for them than the children do for themselves.

As discussed in Chapter Two, in an effort to resolve the problem of the lack of husbands for Western Muslim women, it is not uncommon for imams and other religious leaders throughout the Muslim West to suggest that Muslim women be allowed to marry “pious” non-Muslim men because there is a need. Other imams have issued *fatwas* that discourage Muslim men from marrying women outside of the Western country in which they reside because men’s marriage outside of their community further worsens the problem of a lack of husbands for Muslim women who want to marry someone in their (Western) community. After analyzing the ideals of marriage according to the Qur’an as well as those according to Western Muslims themselves, one finds that the two are in conflict with each other, leading to a lack of available compatible partners especially for Muslim women. This lack can also be attributed to the fact that Muslim men are religiously permitted to marry Christians and Jewish women, which further limits Muslim women’s options, since they are by traditional consensus not allowed to marry Christian and Jewish men. The only traditionally acceptable options available to them, thus, are to enter polygamous marriages, remain single, or marry men who are not suitable for them or with whom they do not feel comfortable.

However, the study proposes that interfaith marriages also be considered for women due to the issues of necessity and as well as compatibility: Western-raised Muslim women are clearly

not the preferred option for Western-raised Muslim men, whom one would imagine would be compatible with them because they share the same culture and many experiences as immigrants or children of immigrants with shifting and conflicted identities as “westerners” and “Muslims.” Yet, Western-raised Muslim men do not seem to be facing the dilemma of unavailable suitable spouse, which, according to many Western Muslim women, is because these men prefer traditional and younger females who do not contest their traditional roles as primarily wives and mothers. This seems true, however, given that it is almost exclusively women who openly express and discuss this crisis with each other especially online.

It would seem that as Muslim women expand the ways in which they find partner—that is, if they considered various methods of mate selection—they might be more able to find suitable husbands. However, that does not seem to settle the dilemma, since, as in the case of marriage events taking place, the ratio of interested men to interested women is too low for it to work effectively or to even take place. Still, the most popular such methods seem to be online matrimonial services and marriage events. While finding mates through social, familial networks is not uncommon, it does not work for many Muslim women because they have passed the age traditionally preferred for marriage for women, or otherwise because they do not prefer to conform to traditional gender norms and roles that they believe they are expected to uphold if they married traditional Muslim men. As such, turning to the Internet increases their chances of finding a suitable partner because it widens the network of potential husbands (or wives in the case of men).

Re-viewing the word *kafa'a*, which does not necessarily mean economic compatibility alone but is a broader term that can include social, personal, cultural compatibility as well, the

study above examines how the traditional understanding of the notion of compatibility affects contemporary Muslims and concludes that they do not define the term the same way. Their unique experiences enable them to understand the concept of compatibility in marriage in such terms that the Qur'an supports their quest for seeking mates with whom they feel compatible, particularly in terms of their personal standards of marriage. That the Shari'a does not allow women to marry below their ranks but marry only their equals or those above them indeed suggests that Islam strives to ensure that the female in particular but the couple in general is fully content with her husband. The research shows that generally, both prior to marriage—during the stage of mate selection—and after marriage, problems of gender roles and rights arise, a problem that suggests that there is a lack of contentment with potential mates and sometimes also post-marriage. Interfaith marriage for women, therefore, becomes a necessary option, acknowledged by some religious authorities throughout the Western Muslim world, so that Muslim women would have a larger pool of available men whom they can marry.

The reasons provided to explain why Muslim women can marry only Muslim men are subjective and rooted in patriarchal, male-dominated social concepts of women's inferiority in intellect and acumen. Once these reasons are evaluated, it becomes clear they do not apply to all societies and times and certainly not to all Muslim women. Not only are the reasons against Muslim women's marriage to men of the People of the Book problematic, but also, providing Muslim women the option to marry men from the People of the Book has become a necessity.

### **The Shortcomings of the Study**

While I suggest in the beginning of the study that I will cover Muslims in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, almost all of the research on Western Muslims with

regards to marriage has turned out to be limited to North American and British Muslims. As such, it takes the concerns, expectations, and problems of North American and British Muslims, and presents them to be exemplary of most, if not all, Western Muslims. Moreover, this study is far more focused on immigrant Muslims' experiences than on native Western Muslims. Perhaps this is because of the research available, much of which is on immigrant experience.

Also, it is hard to determine exactly what the role of the parents in young Muslims' marriages is since on the one hand, a majority of Muslims seem to have their marriages arranged at an earlier age—but still, there is a remarkably high number of unmarried women. It's perhaps safe to conclude that on average, Western Muslim men marry at an earlier age than women do, and men often marry women from their parents' native cultures rather than Western-raised Muslim women. This, as discussed in Chapters two and three, can be attributed to the valuing of traditional gender roles, something that men and Muslim parents tend to expect especially in females, whereas females themselves prefer partners who do not expect them to uphold such norms. Moreover, on the one hand, parents seem to want their children to marry Muslims from their native cultural backgrounds because they believe that Muslims raised in their home countries practice Islam and their culture better than those in the West; on the other hand, the children are being exposed to what they understand to be a more "authentic" Islam, one that they claim is not corrupted by "culture." Hence, both seem to favor piety and religiosity in potential spouses, but they understand this piety and religiosity differently. This study does not take up this issue due to a lack of time and space, but I acknowledge the importance of dissecting this issue.

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