
Pande R. [Geographies of Marriage and Migration: Arranged Marriages and South Asians in Britain](#). *Geography Compass* 2014, 8(2), 75-86.

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DOI link to article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12112>

Date deposited:

04/11/2015

Embargo release date:

05 February 2016



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Accepted version please cite as:

Pande, R. (2014). Geographies of marriage and migration: Arranged marriages and South Asians in Britain. *Geography Compass*, 8(2), 75-86.

Geographies of Marriage and Migration: Arranged Marriages and South Asians in Britain

Abstract

This article examines the extant literature on marriage and migration with reference to the South Asian populations in Britain (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi). It will focus specifically on debates surrounding the practice of arranged marriages, their purpose, value and status in Britain. It will identify a gap in the literature when it comes to theorizing and revealing the contemporary lived experience of arranged marriage among South Asians in Britain through lenses other than that of forced marriage. The article will begin by discussing the different ways in which arranged marriages have been defined. Central to this discussion will be an examination of how arranged marriage, as it is practised by the South Asian diaspora, is viewed as opposed to western notions of marriage, based on ideals of romantic love. It will make a case for a renewed understanding of the institution of arranged marriage, one which gives due recognition to the affective register of such practices. It will conclude by calling for human geography research to attend to how contemporary British South Asians 'do' an arranged marriage, in order to see the ways in which this practice has been translated and reworked to suit individual aspiration and new (trans) national contexts.

Keywords : arranged marriages, human geography, love, British-Asians, emotion

Introduction

This review unpacks the orthodoxies surrounding the practice of arranged marriages. Arranged marriage are often viewed negatively in Western contexts, and are even conflated with forced marriage (e.g. Naipaul writing in the Daily Mail 18/08/2012, Rustin writing in The Guardian 14/05/2011, Leppard and Hussein writing in the Sunday Times 25/09/2005¹). Migrant populations, such as South Asians in Britain, who practice arranged marriages, are seen as characterised by a tussle between the traditional and modern understanding of the basis of marriage. The first generation migrants are deemed to enforce the former while the second and third generation are seen as wanting to embrace the latter more liberal form where they are allowed to choose their spouse based on romantic love.

This article will argue that this is a simplistic and incomplete picture of the practice of arranged marriage as it operates among South Asians in contemporary Britain. It typically presumes romantic love and individual choice to be the determinants of a true relationship, or assumes the complete hold over the migrant of traditional gender and family norms. It also, I contend, contributes to the process of *othering* the migrants from the mainstream population because they are represented as bearers of cultural norms that are in contrast to the western and modern norms of mainstream British life. This article makes a case for a new approach to arranged marriages, one which acknowledges the politics of migration related to marriage and also recognizes the transnational nature and affective register of such practices.

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2190312/I-horror-flee-Pakistan--haunted-eyes-girls-raised-HERE-Nadira-Naipaul-exposes-arranged-marriages-honour-killings-UK.html#ixzz2KapN5RCQ>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2011/may/14/arranged-marriage-afghan-womans-hour>
http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/article149617.ece

My argument is divided into three parts - Part one will begin by discussing the problem of defining arranged marriage practices. It will examine the evolution of romantic love as the basis of western marriage and the ways in which it is used to contrast and marginalise arranged marriage practices, which may attach a different value to the place of romantic love in matchmaking. This is followed by a review of the academic approaches to the study of arranged marriages among South Asian residents in Britain. It will concentrate on the politics of citizenship that accompanies marriage - related migration and the role of women in arranged marriage practices. Finally, I conclude by making a call for more human geographical research into the dynamics of arranged marriage practices.

Defining arranged marriages

It is important to make clear, at the onset, the difference between arranged marriage and forced marriage. In arranged marriages the arrangement involves matchmaking by parents and family, but it is not forced. The option to decline the proposed potential spouse is always present. In my view, arranged marriages can be better defined as a mode of matchmaking in which “a cultural logic of desire”(Del Rosario 2005, p.253) is administered and mediated by the self and the family and where the exercise of choice and agency may be conditioned by a number of socio-economic factors. However, there is some confusion in the literature with regards to what an arranged marriage entails; and its relation to other non-western modes of matchmaking. Anthropologists have used terms such as endogamous marriages (marriages within the same ethnic or social groups) or consanguineous marriages (marriages among blood relatives as are common among Muslim populations). Some researchers (Charsely 2012, Charsley and Shaw 2006, Gardner 2006) prefer to use the term transnational marriages when referring to marriages arranged between partners living in

different countries. (In the case of South Asians in Britain, this refers to marriages arranged between British born Pakistanis, Bangladeshis or Indians with individuals resident in the Indian sub-continent). The term transnational marriage is useful in drawing attention to the ways in which migrants remain attached to their countries and cultures of origin and how transnational networks allow a free flowing exchange of people, their ideas and their cultural practices. It is also important to remind ourselves that not all arranged marriages are transnational; most are arranged among people resident in Britain (Home Office 2001). It is also worth noting that there is an image of what Puar (1995, p.24) calls the “universal arranged marriage”, which dominates media representations of this practice. This image projects arranged marriage merely as a characteristic of male dominated and non western societies and does not acknowledge the diversity of the actual practice. Thus, it is important to make the trite but very often overlooked point that there is no such thing as arranged marriage *singular* but arranged *marriages*. A large variety of matchmaking and marriage practices are bunched together under this heading, so for example - marriages contracted via the phenomenon of mail order brides in Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe to people meeting their future spouse through a date or meeting suggested by their parents or relatives are all arranged marriages.

Arranged marriages do not lend themselves to easy generalised definitions not least because they span a range of practitioners who vary considerably in their nationality, religion and class compositions but also because much like any other social and cultural practice they are being constantly evolved, adapted and changed to fit with their practitioners lives. There is a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to examining the different ways in which arranged marriages are practiced. Arranged marriages are

regarded by most western observers as existing in opposition to western ideals of the basis of marriage .As Catherine Ballard, comments (1977, p.181):

There is an obvious contradiction between the South Asian view of marriage as a contract between two families which should be arranged by parents on their behalf, and the contemporary western ideal that an intimate personal relationship should exist between a couple before they make a decision to marry.

This sentiment is also echoed in more recent calls for minority ethnic populations' assimilation by government agencies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission (*The Sunday Times*, September 5 2005), policy makers at the UK Border agency (2011) and right leaning think tanks such as *MigrationWatch UK*(<http://www.migrationwatchuk.org/>)

Here, arranged marriages are regarded as *the other* of western marriages and an “obvious contradiction” is believed to exist between the South Asian and the western view of marriage. There are three reasons, I argue for this supposed contradiction. Firstly, an ethnocentric public discourse, which constructs arranged marriage as forced marriage and projects its practitioners as having no say in who they marry and as having given up the ideals of agency, choice and love as prized ingredients of modern living. Secondly, a short-sightedness on the part of western viewers to regard the development of the basis of marriage based on romantic love as a timeless norm and not as an evolving product of a particular path taken by the West in its economic and social development. And finally, a belief that the ideas of romance and desire are not compatible with arranged marriage.

As Ballard (1977, p.183) goes on to argue:

For parents to play a decisive part in the choice of their children's spouses is by no means a practice unique to the Indian subcontinent or, in Britain, to South Asian migrants.....it is striking that most marriages in Britain based on 'free' choice are, in fact, contracted between partners of similar personal, social and cultural background.

This final point that most marriages in Britain occur between people of similar background is worth closer examination. I contend that it highlights how arrangement is invariably part of the institution that is marriage. The socio-legal understanding of marriage is still essentially that of a form of contract between two people. In westernised societies, the affective dimensions of marriage especially its basis on romantic love overrides the more prosaic understanding of it in terms of a contract and an institution. That is not to say however that the expectations of class, ethnicity, appearance, religion and/or national affiliation do not count when people in western countries choose to get married.

In the context of South Asians in Britain, their presumed difference from the mainstream population and their construction as *cultural others* assumes that it is merely arrangement that characterizes their marital practices and that they have abandoned the symbolism of romantic love and aspirations. As Khandelwal (2009,p.584) has argued "arranged marriage exemplifies the problem of exaggerated cultural difference". There is in fact research that suggests that in practice, love and arrangement appear as a continuum in the making of a so called arranged marriage. As Charsley and Shaw (2006, p.416, my emphasis) comment:

In many apparently conventionally arranged marriages, the young people may have suggested the marriage or at least influenced the decision that led to the proposal; indeed, British Pakistanis sometimes describe as 'arranged

love marriages' *rishtas* that began as *attraction* between two young people who subsequently asked their families to *arrange* the marriage.

The ideas of love and romance are compatible with arranged marriage. As Mines and Lamb (cited in Shaw and Charsley 2006, p.417) argue, "The contracting of an arranged marriage can equally be remembered as a time of love and romance, approached along with some trepidation, [with] a degree of eager anticipation and romantic expectation". In spite of this research, the dominant assumption about arranged marriages is that they are based on cold rationality, a contract between families rather than a companionate loving relationship between two people.

In order to understand this distinction between what appears to be binary oppositions of love and arrangement in the practice of marriage, it is also useful to discuss the value that is attached to love, and more specifically, romantic love in modern advanced capitalist societies. The idea of romantic love, a theme which featured in ideals of courtly love in the medieval times and was elaborated upon in the Nineteenth Century in the novel, has now become the basis on which people in western societies tend to base their decision to marry someone or to have a long term relationship with. The novels of Jane Austen namely *Emma* (2004 {1816}) and *Pride and Prejudice* (2002{1813}) are examples of a literary genre that glorified romantic love and its pursuit. Theorists like Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have discussed the links between the popularity of the notion of romantic love and self identity. Giddens (1992) argues that the need to look for romantic love and to base our relationships on it is part of western attempts to reflect on and construct a modern and emotional narrative of self. Beck and Beck- Gernsheim (1995) similarly argue that the fundamental theme behind marriage is not merely the social structure of our lives but a

matter of *identity*. Thus, in Western societies, if a marriage is based on love then it acquires extra premium over a union which is seen as being arranged, cold rationality and forward thinking do not go hand in hand with a self - image which is founded on individualism and a high regard for the sublime idea of romantic love. The current marriage and family patterns we see in the West are a result of the ideas of love and individualism formed under capitalism (Povenelli, 2006) The hegemonic nature of capitalism means that other ways of forming relationships, such as arranged marriages, are marginalised in favour of so called love marriages. I argue that we need to acknowledge that there are culturally specific ways of crafting a narrative of self and identity - such as through the process of arranged marriages, whose practitioners prefer to reconcile the desire for individual love and attraction with a consideration for collective and familial relations. When South Asians decide to get married, it is the result of a careful rationalisation of their personal position with respect to their transnational sense of belonging as British-Asians. As I will explain, considerations for ideas of love and romance are involved, but not always in the same order as for some of their western counterparts. This is summed up in the Indian adage, 'Marriage comes first and love follows'.

I believe a preoccupation with the arrangement aspect of South Asians forms of matchmaking has left unexamined the scope of affective, interpersonal and subjective aspects of arranged marriages. The journey of life that takes a new turn when people agree to become partners through the institution of marriage and which involves, in my opinion, a migration of ideas, cultures and individuals has in the context of South Asians, been largely viewed in terms of forced marriage and/or as an immigration problem. There seems to be a common sense understanding of the lack of love in arranged marriages and the lack of

arrangement in love marriages. The problem stems from the binary opposition construction of 'arrangement' and 'love' where both are seen as diagrammatically opposed to each other and on a more wider scale as typifying the difference between the traditional eastern and the modern western cultures. In practice, as I have argued earlier in this article, love and arranged marriages have much in common with love marriages not least the fact that both have an affective and interpersonal dimension to their performance. There is a small but significant body of literature on romance and desire in South Asia particularly in India (Puri 1999, Parry 2001, Donner 2002, Fuller and Narsimhan 2008), Pakistan (Donnan 1998) and Sri Lanka (De Munk 1998) which highlights the affective register of arranged marriage practices and the many ways into love that arranged marriage practices offer.

Following this, some researchers have approached the institution of marriage from the perspective of the construction and extension of human relationships by choice or as most Asians refer to a possible match, a '*Rishta*', a relationship (Shaw & Charsley, 2006), in order to bring out the personal and intimate deliberations that are involved in the choice of spouse. The Hindi/Urdu word '*Rishta*' literally means relation or relationships and it is a term used to refer to a match in the context of an arranged marriage. The usage of this term signifies the relationship and family dimension of matchmaking rather than a merely businesslike arrangement. This approach allows us to better appreciate the various emotional dimensions that are attributed to this practice and also to highlight the presence of a diversity of routes into arranged marriages. Some of these routes have been discussed by researchers examining arranged marriage practices among South Asians in Britain (Jhutti 1998, Raj 2003, Shaw 2006, Pichler 2011). They detail cases of semi-arranged marriages and love and arranged marriages where the prospective couple 'arrange to fall in love' keeping

in mind their parents criteria for their spouse. Since the offspring function within boundaries of caste, class and religion in looking for a spouse the marriage is deemed to be an arranged one. This points to the existence of different ways of 'doing' an arranged marriage where the collective wishes of the parents and the extended family are reconciled with the individual desires and choices of the young people getting married. This way of doing arranged marriages suggests a recalibration of understandings of choice and agency in relation to the performance of romantic love within arranged marriages and also calls for a renewed interest in debates about marriage and migration.

Arranged marriages and South Asians

The term South Asian in Britain is used to represent the people of Indian, Pakistani and/or Bangladeshi origin. It also includes "twice migrants" (Bhachu, 1985) i.e. East African Sikhs and Gujaratis who migrated to Britain following their expulsion from Uganda under Idi Amin's regime. Following their arrival and settlement in Britain, an expansive and eclectic scholarship has emerged under the epithets of South Asian and Subaltern Studies. The focus of this field of study has shifted overtime from a fact gathering exercise about the newly arrived migrants to trying to better understanding their place within British society at large. Some notable works have been by Ballard (1994) who edited a volume titled *Desh-Pardesh: The South Asian presence in Britain*, providing an insightful analysis of the cultural practices of the various sub groups that constitute the South Asian population. Vertovec et al's (1990) work *South Asians Overseas* is another comprehensive account of the population. Other authors have chosen to concentrate on one particular country of origin of the migrants; so where Jeffrey (1976), Werbner (1986, 1990), Shaw (1988) and Charsley (2005a, 2005b) have focused on Pakistanis, Gardner's (1993, 2002, 2003, 2006) and Eade's (1990) work has been

on Bangladeshis. The empirical research on Indians (Vertovec 1990; 1999; 2001, Baumann 1996) has examined a particular religious community or regional identity such as Gujarati (Dwyer 1994; 2004), Kashmiri (Ellis and Khan 2002), Sikh (Brah 1996, Mand 2005), and Hindu - Punjabi (Raj 2003).

There are two main areas of debate under which the literature on South Asians and arranged marriages can be examined:

Marriage migration and the politics of citizenship

Since many arranged marriages entail spouses being chosen from within the migrant community or from the country of origin, migration and marriage become inextricably linked. So where some argue that “traditional practices of arranged marriage are a fully modern means of negotiating the boundaries of citizenship imposed by state” (Mooney 2006, p.389) others advocate that “Ethnic communities can only continue to exist as such via community-endogamous marriages” (Palriwal & Uberoi 2005, p.23). There is also research (Thomas 1996, Uberoi 1998) which regards arranged marriage as a characteristic of the Indian family system; a social institution that quintessentially defines being Indian. It is an institution which Uberoi (1998,p.308-09) argues is now “projected as portable” in the face of migrants reaching up to second and third generation abroad. Indian family values, as exemplified in the institution of arranged marriage, are proposed as crucial markers of Indianness among such expatriates. Roger Ballard (1990, 2001) has discussed the impact of transnational kinship networks on the economic dynamics of the South Asian (mainly Punjabi and Sikh) diaspora. Some more recent work by Sheel (2005), Kalpagam (2005) and Biao (2005) also makes a similar observation about a “political economy of marriage transactions” (Palriwal and Uberoi 2005, p.28). Here the Indian dowry system is linked not

only with transnational marriage migration but also with the creation of a global IT force; the passage of Indian IT professionals, to the US in particular, is funded by the dowry from an arranged marriage (Biao, 2005).

One impact of this transnational aspect of arranged marriages has been that they invite continuing suspicion from immigration officials in migrant receiving countries. In the UK, with the current coalition government's focus on reforming border controls with respect to family reunion, there have been attempts to define and codify genuine and real marriages (UK Border Agency 2011). The UK Border Agency's consultation on family migration in 2011 gave centrality to free will and individual choice in determining if a marriage union is genuine and continuing. The application form for spousal visa (See www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/.../formflrm1020091.pdf) now contains specific questions, which require the applicant to evidence particular enactments of love and companionship, in order to prove that the marriage was based on the free will of both parties involved.

Furthermore, government and policy makers see arranged marriage practices as posing a challenge to the very values on which the discourses of national identities in Europe are based. For example, as Myrdhal (2010) has argued in the case of Norwegian family reunification legislation, romantic love is employed as the basis of constructing the idea of national subjects by citing its existence as a test to determine the legitimacy of a marriage union. She has interpreted Norwegian immigration legislation as a process of advancing a 'racialised project of national belonging' by putting the marital practices and preferences of some of its citizens from minority ethnic groups under scrutiny. Similar arguments have been made about marriage legislation in Denmark (Schmidt 2011) and The Netherlands

(Bonjour and de Hart 2013) where arranged marriages are seen as being counter to 'Danishness' and Dutch identity respectively.

I would contend, that family reunion and immigration legislation play politics with migrant rights and citizenship by *othering* migrant populations from the Global South. In Britain, as Ahmed (2001, p.273) has argued “the trope of arranged marriages is used to circulate as a sign of [British Asian] ‘otherness’ and as a site for intervention and domestication of that otherness”. People who have arranged marriages are viewed as bearers of cultures which are deemed as being in contrast and as posing a threat (in the case of Islam) to the mainstream. Moreover, resistance to arranged marriages become a convenient tool for national governments to tighten legislation to shore up national boundaries. Consequently, this politics of marriage migration leaves little space for acknowledging the complexity, diversity and flexibility of factors and motivations that go into the making of an arranged marriage. Indeed research (Gell 1994, Ahmed 2001, Shaw 2006, Raj 2003, Mukhopadhyaya 2012) has proven that arranged marriages are an increasingly dynamic practice, which is being adapted to fit with the British and Asian aspect of the identities of its practitioners. Gell points to how among the Punjabi Jat Sikhs and other Asian communities in Britain, marriage is ceremonialized in two stages: first in the local Town Hall or registry office and second by means of a religious ceremony held in the place of worship. For the former, many couples prefer to have an ‘English style’ celebration complete with the ritual of cutting the wedding cake and having a champagne reception. This practice points to how “the South Asians ...are explicitly concerned with persuading themselves that they are fully incorporated into the British state” (Gell 1994, p.357). The ritual celebration of the civil wedding is a procedure by which this affirmation is made. Here we see arranged marriage

practices being renegotiated to complement the contested definition of a hyphenated British-Asian conception of citizenship, rather than as something which is antagonistic to a British way of life. My point is that a greater acknowledgement of the transnational and geopolitical context within which arranged marriage practices are being navigated is central to understating the reason for its continuing popularity among second and even third generation South Asian migrants. This will also help us to better appreciate the “shifting multicultural reality”(The Parekh Report 2000,p.27) of British society.

Women’s role in arranged marriages and the construction of the ‘third world woman’

Feminist scholars have approached arranged marriages by focussing on the concept of agency. Here, one strand of work has looked at the lack of agency exhibited by women involved in transnational arranged marriages (See for example Menski 1999 and Abraham 2005 on the dependent visa status of migrant women in arranged marriages; Constable 2005, Lu 2005 and Blanchet 2005 on mail order brides, Jeffery 1976, Shaw 1998 and Werbner 1986 on patriarchy and Pakistani women, Sheel 2005 on dowry and marriage in the US, Bhopal 2000, 2011 on South Asian women in London). The other strand has looked at the opposite i.e. expressions and evidence of agency and choice within the arrangement. The second strand has been instrumental in bringing to light the diversity of women’s experiences of arranged marriages and the role they are able to play in them (Donner 2002, Raj 2003, Sen et.al 2011, Pichler 2011, Mukpadhayaya 2013). This research has highlighted how women are actively involved in negotiations of arranged marriages and are able to exhibit choice and agency within a largely patriarchal cultural sensibility. So for example Ester Gallo (2005, 2006) in her research on Malayali (from Kerala) female migrants in Italy provides a fresh insight into how women’s pioneering role as migrants has enabled them to

play an active part in developing a wide network of marriage and family ties involving transnational arranged marriages. She argues that in this way arranged marriages, far from being a site of lack of agency, become an important field in the redefinition of gender relations.

The shift in research focus from highlighting the victimization of women to acknowledging their agency within marriage and migration has been led by postcolonial feminists (Mohanty 1991, hooks 1993, Lâm 1994, Spivak 1998, Brah 1996), who have long been critical of the universalising tendencies of what Mohanty (1991) has called 'white feminism' which has sought to represent women from the Global South as being in need of liberation, "not in terms of their own herstory and needs but into the 'progressive' social mores and customs of the metropolitan West" Carby (1982, p.216). Moreover, a preoccupation with examining the lack of agency among women in the developing world is a result of the discursive creation of the monolithic category of the "third world woman" (Mohanty 1991, 51). This portrayal subsumes any difference between women from the global south and their cultures under a single category of the 'repressed third world woman'. Here feminists demanding women's rights become strange bedfellows with neo-conservative commentators (See Okin 1999, Wikan 2002, Ali 2006) who see western nuclear family structures as more progressive than black family structures. In such a scenario there is little incentive to talk about those women who claim to have chosen to have an arranged marriage or of Asian women who do not equate freedom with adopting western ideals of womanhood. Thus, there is a need to theorise the practice and affect of agency and power in the lives of women from lenses other than those that cast women from the third world as victims of their cultures. In this way it we can re-orient the western feminist outlook towards acknowledging and accepting the particularities of non-western cultures and the material,

social and affective sustenance that women derive from them. When it comes to arranged marriages, we must pay attention to the intersections of 'race', ethnicity, class and religion which influence the identity politics around the term 'third world woman' and the impacts of neoliberalism on the discourses of human/women rights (Alexander 2002; Yuval-Davis 2006; Dwyer and Shah 2009).

Geographies of marriage and migration: A research agenda

The article has outlined the main trends in South Asian studies where the subjects have been Asians resident in Britain and their marital practices. By critically reviewing the literature, I have highlighted how arranged marriage has been studied as an adjunct to other research topics (e.g. migration and suppression of women's agency). I have also discussed the problematic of defining arranged marriages especially when its meaning gets conflated with that of forced marriages and it is seen as a practice in need of a change to the modern ideals of western love marriages. Thus, I argue new research needs to acknowledge the diversity of arranged marriage forms and their acceptance by South Asians. By reconceptualising arranged marriage outside of its representations as forced marriage, we can begin to understand how its various forms are employed by its practitioners to interpret and tailor make this apparently traditional practice to suit their modern individual and collective identity positions. I would argue that geographers have much to offer when it comes to exploring the reconceptualization of arranged marriage practices in a globalising world.

Scholarship on arranged marriage has long been the realm of anthropology where ideas of property and kinship can still inform the dominant understandings of this practice. I will

refer to three areas in geography where the study of arranged marriage practices can be situated. Firstly, given the rise of interest in geographies of emotion (See Davidson and Milligan 2004) and calls for more critical engagement with the 'spatial, relational and political aspects of love' (Morrison, Johnston and Longhurst 2012), it seems that time is ripe for geographical scholarship to extend our engagement with the interpersonal and affective import of arranged marriage practices and the motivation that guide their exercise. Secondly, the long tradition of the critique of gender relations by feminist geographers (McDowell 1992, Rose 1993, Stahaeli and Lawson 1995, Kobayashi 1994, Laurie et.al 1999) provides fertile ground to examine the changing role of women in arranged marriage practices and the evolution of marriage in general as a particular socio-legal and cultural institution. Lastly, postcolonial geography (Blunt and McEwan 2002) and its elucidation of the 'worlding' (Spivak 1985, Ahmed 2000) of colonised space with Eurocentric ideas of civilization is another area where human geographers can destabilise the existing dominant discourses of intimacy and, individual and romantic love that have partly been responsible for the marginalization of non-western forms of marriage and family practices.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Anoop Nayak and Peter Phillimore for supervising the doctoral research on which this article is based. I hope their suggestions for improvement on the thesis have found a place in this paper. Divya Tolia-Kelly encouraged me to write this and Gail Davis has provided valuable editorial guidance throughout the publications process. Thanks also to the two anonymous referees whose comments have greatly helped in improving the contents of this paper. All mistakes and omissions remain my own.

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