



Commentary

Whether marriage can be free and ideal...?

Dhastagir Sultan Sheriff

Faculty of Medicine, Anna Medical College, Mauritius

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“For adults, a stable, happy marriage is the best protector against illness and premature death, and for children, such a marriage is the best source of emotional stability and good physical health”. -William Doberty

Introduction

Marriage is an esteemed institution in India, encompassing a multitude of cultural diversities. It serves as the cornerstone of family units, which are integral components of the social fabric of society. A notable shift has occurred in perspectives on marriage and love, with increased discourse surrounding the concept of free love. Furthermore, considerable attention has been given to advocating for more lenient divorce laws. Surprisingly, however, there appears to be a dearth of initiatives promoting the concept of free marriage. This prompts the question: why hasn't such a campaign been contemplated?^[1]

A marriage devoid of restrictions is a blissful union. There is absolutely no doubt about it. Every factor contributing to marital unhappiness can be seen as some form of constraint. These

constraints may stem from economic or legal circumstances, but most of them are rooted in personal Issues. While some marriages collapse due to economic factors or oppressive legal frameworks that burden one or both partners, it is indisputable that numerous unions are shattered by the personal deficiencies of the individuals involved.^[1-2]

There are many happy marriages in the poorest sections of the community. Even so, it is undeniable that inadequate family income accounts for a vast amount of friction and unhappiness. The constant struggle to make ends meet will wear down the nerves of the wife. The continual fight against the odds, year in, year out, will break the spirit of many a man. With nerves worn down and spirits broken one of the partners becomes 'impossible to live with'.^[2]

To the social investigator poverty is mainly a matter of inadequate shelter, food and clothing. To the economist, it is the relation a particular income bears to the cost of living at any specific date. But to us, concerned about marriage, it is most emphatically one of the chains which must be torn away its free marriage is to be realized. For poverty binds families down, strains the whole atmosphere of the home, and often makes the friendly relationship which should exist impossible.

Corresponding author: Dr. Dhastagir Sultan Sheriff

Email: drdsheeriff@gmail.com

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But that is only the simplest illustration of how economic factors affect marriage. There are others which are not so obvious. For instance, the dependent position of the wife in most homes is an economic factor which unquestionably tends to mar marriage. I have known wives of wealthy men who never have a penny they can call their own. True, their larger need-dress and the like-are always promptly met with the husband's bank balance. But they cannot spend time apart from their husbands. They cannot indulge in little luxuries or entertain their friends impulsively. They are completely dependent. They are tied tightly to their husband's purse-strings. They are not free. This is true of early marriage with poverty making feminization of poverty.

Sometimes, too, the position of economic dependence is occupied by the husband. He may not depend upon his wife for every penny he needs. But because of poorly paid employment, he may have to take second place as family bread winner to his wife who goes out to work.

“Why shouldn't men sometimes play second fiddle to their wives in this respect”. I have sometimes been asked by women who are mindful, very mindful, of the opportunities which increasingly are open to women in business and the professions. But the strict rights or wrongs of the matter are not the point at issue. It may be a good thing that women should outshine and out-earn their husbands in fields outside of the home, just as it may be a good thing for husbands to be better cooks, child nurses, or needle-workers than their wives.^[3]

But it is with the severely practical aspect that I am concerned. And it is undeniable that, as a rule, the man who must play a minor role while his wife earns the greater part of the family income, suffers agonies of mind. The wife, too, however kindly disposed she may be towards her husband, is almost certain at some time or other, in the course of an argument, to

ask, “After all, if it were not for what I earn, where should we all be”.

These are only three illustrations of how economic conditions affect marriage. Scores of others could be cited. The fear of having children, or more children, lies at the root of the feeling that adequate financial provision cannot be made for any addition to the family.

Political leaders and economists must solve the economic problems of marriage. My purpose here is merely to draw attention to them. Every step taken towards economic problems of marriage. My purpose here is merely to draw attention to them. Every step taken towards economic security for the masses of our people, providing that it does not undermine the essential family relationship, is a move in the direction of the free marriage.

There has been considerable discourse in recent years concerning the legal status of married women. The prevailing condition of economic reliance, which is commonly experienced by many wives, is legally sanctioned. However, with the recent surge in women reaching economic independence, the male dominance within the institution of marriage is being questioned.

The true impediments to unrestricted marriage do not originate from external sources, but rather from internal ones. If we lack freedom, we are obliged to bring the shackles that restrain us into the institution of marriage. While some of these constraints stem from individual circumstances, others are shaped by society. No one would think of disputing that marriage is essentially for adults, yet, as we shall see later, many marriages fail because one or both of the partners, although of adult years, are emotionally immature. Outwardly they are like other adults, but they have never developed an adult sense of proportion where sex is concerned. They cannot treat their subject rationally at all. If it is mentioned in conversation, they become angry, or flush up and feel awkward. They

know that become angry, or flush up and feel awkward. They know that sex relationships are normal and necessary to the fulfillment of life, yet there is always at the back of their minds a lingering doubt whether it is 'quite nice' to breathe a word about the sexual aspects of experience. This reluctance does not arise from a failure to appreciate the importance of the matter, nor is it due to lack of knowledge about it. Many senior teachers, for example, who willingly admit the need of their pupils for sex instruction, cannot bring themselves to impart it. They recognize that this attitude is foolish, but they are incapable of emancipating themselves from it.

Prevalence of reticence and self-consciousness - can it be accounted?

Superstition and fertility rites of primitive religions may play a leading role in such situations. Because the sex impulse is powerful is powerful, it is also dangerous. Its uncontrolled indulgence threatens the integrity of family life, the security of children and the peace of the community. The primitive, superstitious method of inducing people to restrain powerful and dangerous impulses was to "wrap them in mystery" make people thoroughly frightened of them; and even today our personal behavior and social attitudes are controlled more completely than we know by taboos and prohibitions, rooted in superstitious fear, which have been handed down to us in customs, traditions and habits of thought from the distant past.

Although we know, or should know, that the greatest source of danger is ignorance, and that we can break the power of ignorance and the fear it breeds only by increasing knowledge, in practice we still cling to the older method. The pressure of habit and custom weighs heavily upon us. Our fear of sex and our fear of each other work together to support a superstitious attitude which is reflected in the strength of our feelings, and we obey them by saying, in effect, "Sex is dangerous. Let's pretend there is no such thing, then we shall be safe".

The consequence of this attitude is that we are all, to some extent, the victims of what amounts to a conspiracy to prevent people from growing up. Too many adults dream their way along the road to marriage, expecting at any moment to find a soul mate appearing, on direct instructions from heaven, to greet them and live happily with them ever after!

Mothers look for at all costs to prevent the chill realities of life from touching their children. For this purpose, they use wad after wad of emotional cotton wool. "Someday my prince will come"! Santa Claus will pop out of the grate and bring the precious gift of love!

Books and plays which feature the romantic legend are generally regarded, and sometimes described, as of 'high tone'. Girls are told repeatedly in books, plays, lectures, sermons, and by implication in a host of other ways, that their salvation in life lies in getting married and in 'making a home'. Only slowly is the need for preparation, preliminary training, being recognized. Overall, the attitude still is that eventually. "Love will knock at the door of your heart".

Girls who have been encouraged to believe this romantic rubbish sometimes get the habit of sitting for hours on end-dreaming of the wondrous creature who will "come into their lives" someday. They read novels which confirm these absurd, childish fancies. They see films in which "it all comes right to the end", without any conscious, deliberate, brave effort on anybody's part. If you want to draft a story for a popular magazine read by the masses, rule one is: Have a happy conclusion. These situations due to hormonal chaos warrant consideration.

Alas, life is not at all like that. Those who realize this truth will be happier for the knowledge! Prince Charming holds many married women in bondage. They compare their very human, and therefore ordinary, husbands, with the dream-figure of the handsome prince, and feel badly let down. Why is not the husband all that the good

prince has been for so many years? Why is the reality not as perfect as the dream picture?

Men are sometimes enslaved by a Fairly Princess in precisely the same way. The romantic approach to love and marriage, drilled into them by a score of agencies, ranging from home influence and, to some extent, fostered by the law of the land, causes them to regard women as just a little higher than the angels. One from among this host of perfect creatures, will serve her with all his being, and nothing will come between them and will be lovely, both in the garden and in the house!

These slaves of dream-creations, having been brought up to believe in the magical kind of love, very easily become slaves of love. They really do fall in love with love. They fall in and they fall out with unfailing regularity. They always find that their affections have been misplaced. Never does the object of the temporary affection prove 'worthy' if it. The truth is, of course, that they are incapable of loving anyone for long, since they are really in love with the idea of love-yes, and a totally mistaken idea of love at that! It is these emotional infants who sigh as they declare that love is everything. It most emphatically is not. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" so vividly said by William Shakespeare..

Love is the motive-power which drives the machinery of the married relationship. It is the incentive of all that is best in marriage- the driving force which keeps the partners striving when they must surmount obstacles, or when, with aching hearts and set teeth, they must fight a terrific battle. Love is not the end of any road. At best it is the start of a long road.

The romantic idealists refuse to learn from what they see around them. Almost every adult knows people who have married while they were very obviously 'in love', only to become frankly bored with each other after a time, possibly a very short time. They may even have grown to hate the very sight of each

other! Grim proofs of the romantic fallacy abound on every hand. But old ideas - especially unsound ones! - die hard.

We'd better be clear about this before we go any further. Falling in love and being in love are not quite the same thing as loving. The first is essentially self-centered, for it is, in the main, an expression of sexual desire. The second, although it always includes the first when it occurs between a man and a woman, is a total response of person to person.

When we are in love, we urgently want another human being as a possession, capable both of stimulating and satisfying our physical desire. The condition is a kind of hunger, and it has pretty much the same effect as hunger upon our thoughts and feelings.

Just as a starving man dream of wonderful banquets and imagines that a crust of bread will taste like a millionaire's dinner, so a man or woman in love sees the object of desire as a vision of incomparable loveliness, the embodiment of every virtue. Every desirable quality of the beloved captures the attention and is magnified by imagination to the point of perfection. Every human limitation, fault and weakness is ignored.

While this state lasts it can have a most powerfully inspiring and transforming effect on the lives and outlooks of the people going through it - and often on their friends as well. At the same time, it can, and usually does, arouse equally powerful emotions of jealousy and possessiveness, sometimes very painful to bear - again because, like hunger, it springs from a physical need and is therefore fundamentally self-centered.^[1-3]

Now there is no point in denying that love - the real thing - includes this element of physical desire, or that 'failing' in love is usually its beginning. The crucial difference is that real love includes all the rest of the personality as well. It is a relationship that outlasts the satisfaction of all desire because it holds a man and woman together in mutual trust, loyalty

and understanding when they see each other and know each other as they truly are, not only as they seem to be when the intoxication of 'being in love' blinds both of them to the human faults, failings and weakness of the other. In a word, people 'in love' want to make love together. People who love to want to make life together - and living is a full time job.

If we give love its due, we shall give love much, in all truth; but even when we think of it in the very full sense I have tried to define, we must recognize that love alone does not make a marriage happy. It is the basis of a happy marriage, but love-plus is the genuine recipe - love plus a number of things that vary according to circumstances and to the make-up and aspirations of the partners. One essential quality linked with love is common sense, which is not nearly as common as its name implies.

If love alone were enough - love unguided by common sense and unaided by reasonable competence in the ordinary affairs of life - many a marriage which I have known to fail would have proved an outstanding success. One extreme case I recall concerned two people whose love for each other was intense. Each felt a consuming urge to give; their love assumed a sacrificial quality which, within reason, would have been touching and beautiful.^[4]

But it was not kept within reason. Astonishing extremes of sacrifice by each partner soon resulted in misery for both. There was a veritable competition to be the better doormat! Each feared what the other would do next. Neither could bear to take part in any enjoyable activity without the other. A deep-rooted conviction, which had its beginning in early religious training, that genuine love must inevitably be linked with extreme sacrifice dogged both their lives and, eventually, ruined their marriage. The story of a man married to a mentally compromised wife because he promised to be her husband is an exception to all theories of marriage.^[5]

We can hardly overestimate the importance of love. Yet we can quite easily create a wrong impression as to what love is, and what is its place in the happy marriage. That, indeed, is precisely what is being done. We tend to put tremendous emphasis upon the importance of being in love. Yet we should help our young people more by insisting that being 'in love' and loving somebody are not by any means the same. It is a fact that those who marry merely because they are in love run the gravest risks of marital unhappiness.

Success in marriage depends to a substantial extent not upon what kind of partner we choose, nor upon the general conditions of our marriage, but upon the sort of person we are. An unhappy marriage is not the result of a decision made by a committee presided over by the Evil one in the nether regions; any more than a happy marriage is one bearing the mark: Made in heaven.

Point to any unhappy marriage, and what do you find more than anything else? Two people, two ordinary human beings, who cannot cooperate fully and effectively in something to which they should attach immense importance and in which it is very much to their interest to succeed.

Yet it is still customary in many quarters to adopt as attitude which is quite as absurd as this as far as preparing young people for love and marriage is concerned. How many husbands and wives of today was given the slightest teaching or preparation on how to be a good husband or wife? How many young people who contemplate marriage have been guided into the ability to be expert lovers?

While there is still a considerable amount of risk in attempting to furnish in print clear information on the subject of sex and marriage which the least-educated can understand - information which is clearly necessary to the well-being of all adults who marry or contemplate marriage - the most dangerous drivel is not merely permitted, but actually encouraged.

In the sphere of marriage, it is vitally necessary that there should be no feeling in either of the partners that there is anything unpleasant about sex. But we must face the fact that thousands of married people are robbed of much of the enjoyment which the married relationship should bring because they are not free within themselves. They are victims to false attitudes which the past has instilled and developed within them. Only clear instruction, honestly and fearlessly given, can be given them the freedom they need.

The concept of free marriage embodies the union of two emotionally mature individuals, who come together to share their lives and unite for mutual enrichment in the most intimate way possible for human beings. A foundation of equality is essential, with both partners contributing towards the common well-being. Therefore, the ideal marriage can be seen as a microcosm of an ideal community.^[6-7]

The participants in this voluntary union must themselves be liberated-liberated from the internal fears that arise. Achieving this ideal cannot be fully realized in a brief period, as centuries of misunderstandings and a collective suppression of discussions on matters of sexuality have affected all of us to

some extent, preventing us from about sex as the inherent aspect it truly is. Nevertheless, free marriage, as an ideal, is deserving of continuous pursuit, as it is only through it that men and women can achieve their utmost well-being.

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