
MARRIAGE IN THE PRE-ISLAMIC ARAB WORLD

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DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.3423305

Link: <https://dx.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.3423305.v1>

ABSTRACT:

The Arabs, before the advent of Islam, had contacts with different nations and followers of religions & schools of thoughts. It influenced them in a way or the other. Such impacts can be easily seen on their social life whose story has reached us through their writings, poems and the Islamic literature including the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth. Marriage is an integral part of the social life either to continue the human generation or to be pious and far from evil deeds. The pre-Islamic Arabs preferred being married and did not like to be single except a few who were influenced with the Christianity. And when Islam came it strengthened this view. The Arabs liked marriage for reasons the most worth-mentioning among them was their habit of war and also their daily business like feeding the animals. War generally needed youth like grazing and leading the animal to the pasture. We find several ways of marriage among these Arabs including arranged and love marriages. Even some of them practiced homosexuality. The following paper will present their concept of marriage, its reasons, its criteria, its different ways & kinds, right of divorce and duties of the couple.

KEYWORDS: *Marriage, Pre-Islamic, Arab, Al-Shighār, Al-Mut'ah*

Introduction:

Marriage, its concepts, its benefits, its reasons and its ways are different and sometimes contrary in different societies and nations. Similarly,

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divorce, its rights and its ways are different as per the opinions and thoughts of the peoples. The Arabs were also a nation that had its ways and thoughts in dealing with any problem, event and occurrence. Moreover they had contacts with the non-Arabs which paved way for infiltration of some ideas and thoughts which not purely Arabian. Marriage, which is an integral part of the society, also captured their attention and which is why we find them practicing several, and sometimes contrary, ways of marriage, divorce, and maternal or paternal duties.

The Arabian Concept of Marriage: The Arabs never liked to be bachelor except in a few cases. That's why they called those who didn't like to live with their couple as "Al-'Innīn" (العنين) for male and "Al-'Innīnah" (العنينة) for female and those who didn't like to talk with the women were named as "Al-'Uzāt" (العزاة). They also coined a word "Zair al-Nisā'" (زير النساء) which means "Ladies' man" for those who were fond of talking women without any bad will. It is significant from the above citations that they always preferred to get married and to have many sons. They said: "النكاحُ خيرٌ من الأيْمَةِ" (Tr.: Marriage is better than being single.)

They also said: "الزَوْجُ الصَّالِحُ أبٌ بعدَ أبٍ" (Tr.: The pious husband is like a father after the latter's death.)

Causes behind their Marriage: There were several causes behind their act of marriage the most famous among them were (1) Man-power to fight against their enemies. (2) Eloquence in competition at the time of pride. (3) Continuity of their generation. (4) Personal services.

As far as the first reason is concerned they liked to marry with a girl that can give birth to many children. It is they who replied while being asked about their preferred girl:

"----- التي في بطنها غلام، تحمل على وركها غلامًا، يمشي وراءها غلام"³.

Tr.: ----- that has a male baby in her womb, carries a male child on her hip and is followed by a boy.

Being proud of great number of his men, Hājib b. Zurārah al-Taimī said in a meeting of pride: "----- لأنَّا أكثرُ الناسِ عددًا ----" (Tr.: Verily, we are greater than the people in number.)

Nufail bin ‘Abd al-‘Uzzá said to Ḥarb bin Umayyah:

"يا أبا عمرو: أتنافر رجلاً هو أطول منك قامة-----وأكثر منك ولداً"5.

Tr. O Abū ‘Amr: Do you compete the person who is taller than you ---- and more than you in the number of children ----.

A beautiful, charming and wise Arab girl who offered marriage by seven brothers advised her father to prefer the brother that is handsome and that can father many children. She said after hearing their offer:

"أنكحني على قدرتي، ولا تشطط في مهري، فإن تخطئي أحلامهم، لا تخطئي أجسامهم، لعلني أصيب ولداً، وأكثر عدداً"6.

Tr.: Marry me as per my ability and don't overrate my nuptial gift. If their minds could not reach me, their bodies will be able to find. It's because I could get children and be more in number.

For this very feeling Allah points out the proud of a rich person to his poor fellow:

"-----وكان له ثمرة فقال لصاحبه وهو يحاوره أنا أكثر منك مالاً وأعز نفراً"7.

Tr.: And he had fruit in abundance. So he told his companion, arguing boastfully with him, "I am richer than you in wealth and stronger in respect of men.

It is clear that the increase in number of the issues helps a man to impress his opponent. ‘Āmir bin al-Ṭarb al-‘Adwānī said to his men:

"---إنّ عليك كما أنّ لك، وللكترة الرعب، وللصبر الغلبة"8.

Tr.: There will be a day against you as it is in favour of you, and the majority has its guts, and patience brings to you victory".

As regards the competition in pride Allah indicates to the love of the Arabs for the birth of a male child rather than a female child:

"---أم اتخذ مما يخلق بناتٍ وأصفاكم بالبنين. وإذا بشر أحدهم بما ضرب للرحمن مثلاً ظل وجهه مسوداً وهو كظيم، أو من ينشأ في الحلية وهو في الخصام غير مبين"9.

Tr.: Has He taken daughters from what He has created, and honored you with sons. Yet when tidings are given to one of them of what that the like of which he ascribes to the Gracious God, his faces becomes darkened and he is choked with grief. Do you ascribe to God one who is reared among ornaments, and who is not clear in disputation.

As for the continuity of the generation, the Arabs said: "من لا يلد لا يُلد" ¹⁰
(Tr.: One who does not beget has not been born yet.)

And it is they who said:

"سوداء ولود خير من حسناء عاقر" ¹¹.

Tr.: A black girl that gives birth to many children is better than a childless beautiful girl.

These sons also did their personal duties like feeding animal and helping their mother at home.

Criteria of Marriage: The first and the main criterion of marriage in them was pure blood relation and the origin of the bride/bridegroom. They didn't like to marry with those whose blood relation was not pure or who were not equal to them in the family relation. For this very reason they buried their daughters alive lest they would be married with those who were less than them in this criterion. But when Islam came in full power it cancelled this criterion replacing it by piety. ¹²

Along with this basic qualification they liked such wife as could be well-born, rich, healthy, well-built, beautiful, good-looking, bright like moon light, sharp-minded, sweet-voiced with pleasing conversation, talkative, having sexy and low eyes, smooth cheeks, sweet lips, beautiful and tall neck, big breasts, childish palms, healthy hips, brown-skinned, thankful, co-operative, patient and able to bear many children. ¹³

As for the bridegroom they preferred that who had following qualities:

Glorious, dreadful, defensive, determined, generous, helpful, mediator, wise, gentle, host, handsome, tall, peerless and envied. ¹⁴

Ways of Marriage among the Arabs

The Arabs had several ways of marrying with the girls, which are as follows:

1. ***Al-Nikāh* (النكاح) The Proper Way of Marriage**: This type of marriage is very common among the societies. This is known as arranged marriage. In this way, the responsible persons of the bridegroom or the groom himself or the mediator asked the hands of the bride from her father or the responsible persons and when they accepted the representatives from both the sides gathered to fix the dowry (مهر) and also they fixed the date. On the fixed day all of them gathered in the presence of the just witnesses and took a little meat. Then they sat a tent for meeting of the couple. After this meeting they also scattered the sweets.

The dowry was not little in that day except that it was given by the bridegroom. It was very much even they said to the person who had a daughter:

"هنيئًا لك النافجة"¹⁵.

Tr. Congratulate you the girl that can make an increase in your money.

This dowry was paid in two installments; one before marriage and the other at the time of divorce or death from his property.

2. ***Al-Shighār* (الشغار) Vacancy**: For fleeing from the huge dowries, the party exchanged marriage; the sister of a brother married the sister of the other and vice-versa. It could be in the case of daughters too. But Islam prohibited such type of marriage.
3. ***Al-Badal* (البدل) Alternative**: This type of marriage is like *Al-Shighār*.
4. ***Al-Khidn* (الخدن) Friend**: In this way, a girl/boy had friendship with a boy/girl and perhaps they allow to do everything. Allah says pointing out to such relation:

"ومن لم يستطع منكم طولًا أن ينكح المحصنات المؤمنات فمن ما ملكت أيمانكم من فتياتكم المؤمنات والله أعلم بإيمانكم بعضكم من بعض فإنكحوهن بإذن أهلهن وآتوهن أجورهن بالمعروف محصنات غير مسافحات ولا متخذات أهدان"¹⁶.

Tr.: And whoso of you cannot afford to marry free, believing woman, let him marry what your right hands possess, namely, your believing handmaids. And Allah knows your faith best; you are all one from another; so marry them with the leave of their masters and give them their dowries according to what is fair, they being chaste, not committing fornication, nor taking secret paramours-----.

As for taking girl friend its evidence has been given in the marriage of *Al-Sifāh*.

5. ***Al-Mut'ah* (المتعّة Contract Marriage):** In this way two persons marry each other for a limited time. This type of marriage was permitted up to the early period of Islam but later it was prohibited for fear of the spread of prostitution.
6. ***Al-Sifāh* (السفاح Fornication):** In this way, two persons (male and female) did intercourse with each other and if they liked each other they married each other. But when Islam came in full power it cancelled this marriage. Allah says:

"اليوم أحلّ لكم الطيبات وطعام الذين أوتوا الكتاب حلّ لكم وطعامكم حلّ لهم والمحسنات من المؤمنات والمحسنات من الذين أوتوا الكتاب من قبلكم إذا آتيتموهنّ أجورهنّ محصنينّ غير مسافحينّ ولا متخذينّ أخدانٍ --
 .17"---

Tr.: This day all good things have been made lawful for you. And the food of the People of the Book is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them. And lawful for you are chaste believing woman and chaste woman from among those who were given the Book before you, when you give them their dowries, contracting valid marriage and not committing fornication nor taking secret paramours---.

7. ***Al-Baghāya* (البغايا Prostitution):** In this way, a group of men did intercourse with a prostitute one after the other and when she got pregnant and gave birth to a child she linked the baby to the man to whom the baby was more similar.
8. ***Al-Liwāṭah* (اللوطة Homosexual):** Like to-day's this type of sex was also found in the pre-Islamic period. To-day it has become a legal marriage in some countries. But Islam has prohibited it. Narrating the story of the people of the Prophet Lūt, Allah says:

"ولوطاً إذ قال لقومه أ تأتون الفاحشة ما سبقكم بها من أحد من العالمين، إنكم لتأتون الرجال شهوةً من دون النساء بل أنتم قومٌ مسرفون. وما كان جواب قومه إلا أن قالوا أخرجوهم من قريتكم إنهم أناسٌ يتطهرون" ¹⁸.

Tr.: And We sent Lut---when he said to his people, 'Do you commit an abomination such as no one in the world ever did before you? You approach men with lust instead of women. Nay, you are a people who exceed all bounds. And the answer of his people was no other than that they said, 'Turn them out of your town, for they are men who would keep pure.

9. ***Al-Sihāq* (السحاق) Lesbianism**: This type of sex was also existing in the pre-Islamic society but no such case was heard in the early period of Islam. To-day it has become so common even it has become lawful in some countries. Islam does not allow such type of sex.
10. ***Al-Istibdā'* (الاستبضاع) Trade**: In this way, the husband said to his wife after menstruation to go to anyone whom he pointed out and told her to do intercourse with him. He left her till the next menstruation. If she got pregnant then he (the husband) had right to take her back or to send her back to the said person.
11. ***Al-Jam'a* (الجمع) Group**: In this way of marriage, a group of men consisting of less than ten gathered with a prostitute and did intercourse with her and made her pregnant. After the birth of child she called them and none had courage to reject her call. Then she related her story of what happened with her and linked the baby to whom she liked.
12. ***Al-Maqt* (المقت) Hate**: This is a unique kind of marriage where there anyone of the sons of a father and most probably the elder-bachelor got married with his mother after his father's death. The way for this marriage was to shed the shawl on her head.
13. ***Al-Jama' bain al-Ukhtain* (النكاح بين الأختين) Marriage with two Real Sisters**: It was also narrated that some of them married with two real sisters in a time. But Islam has cancelled this type of marriage.
14. ***Al-Nikāh min al-Bint* (النكاح من البنت) Marriage with own daughter**: Being influenced with the Mazdaism which allows the marriage of a

father with his own daughter some Arabs married with their own daughters. This type of marriage was prohibited by Islam.

15. *Al-Tabattul* (التبتل): Being influenced by Christianity, some pre-Islamic Arabs (male and female both) determined to not marry and to be bachelor forever. The men who did so were called “*Al-Ṣarūr*” (الصرور) and the women who did so were called “*Al-Ṣarūrah*” (الصرورة) or “*Al-Batūl*” (البتول). But Islam prohibited all type of monasticism. The Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) said: “لا رهبانية في الإسلام”¹⁹ (Tr.: There is no monasticism in Islam.)

He also said: “إن الرهبانية لم تكتب علينا”²⁰ (Tr.: Monasticism is not imposed upon us.)

He again said: “لا ضرورة في الإسلام”²¹ (Tr.: There is no monasticism in Islam.)

Apart from these types of marriages they believed in polygamy and married up to ten women²² as well as the woman married with more than one husband at a time.²³ The famous poet Imru-ul-Qais married many times.²⁴

16. *Al-Bu’ūlah* (البعولة): There was another system of marriage in the pre-Islamic Arab world which was called “*al-Ba’ūlah*” but there is no details regarding it in the history books related to this period.

Right and Way of Divorce: Both the couple had right to divorce but mostly it was the husband to give divorce to the wife. The way of divorce in them was to change the direction of their door; from north to south or from east to west.

Rights and Duties of the Couple: The couple who married and then had issues had some rights as well as they had to pay some duties which are as follows:

A. Rights of the Couple:

- **Rights of the Husband:** In the pre-Islamic Arab world wife and children were considered as properties of the husband. So he had right to sell them or to enforce them to commit any unlawful thing or to

follow any course. We find many examples where fathers killed their issues, mortgaged their sons or lost their wives in gambling.

- **Rights of the Wife:** A wife had no rights in pre-Islamic period except that she was all in all in the home-related matters and it's because mostly the husband lived out of the house for hunting or fighting.

B. Duties of the Couple:

The duties of a husband were very limited. He had only to save the children and wife from the enemies. As for the wife she had to do many jobs which are summarized in the words of the famous historian Ṭal'at Ḥarb:

"أما أخلاقهم فهي بالجملة حسنة وخير ما يزينهنّ عزة النفس وشدة التعلق بالأهل والأزواج وقيامهنّ مقامهم في أكثر الأعمال ولا يقوم الرجال بشيء من أعمالهنّ. فاشتغال البدويّ مقصورٌ على الغارات والغزوات والمرأة رفيقةٌ ومعينة له في كثير منها وجميع ما بقي مفروضٌ على المرأة بحيث لو انقطع الرجل مدة في طلب السلب والدفاع كانت هي ربة البيت مكلفةً بكلّ ما تستلزمه إدارة المعيشة والتربية فاعتماده عليها تامٌّ أو يكاد واعتماده عليه ناقص. وهي مع ذلك راضيةٌ وهو غيرٌ راضٍ"-----"25.

Tr.: As for their manners they had good manners the best among them were ego, strong relations with their families and husbands and being their deputies in most of the jobs but the men did not do any of their jobs. It's because the bedouin was busy in capturing pastures and waging war. The woman had to help him even in most of this business. The remaining jobs were left to her as if the man became far from his house for a period of time in snatching or defense she was the master of the house and did all jobs including management of provision and upbringing of the children. So the husband was probably fully dependant upon her while she wasn't. After this all she was happy with him but he wasn't.

Conclusion: It is seen from the above short discussion that the Arabs liked being married and they do not prefer to be single. They practiced all type¹s of marriage even they did not prohibit prostitution. It's because they wished to have many children for some urgent needs (fighting and

feeding). There were very rare cases of monasticism but majority did not like to be single.

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