

MARRIAGE : THE GARDEN OF ROSES

By Rajeshwari Narahari

Marriage: The garden of roses

“When the years have done irreparable harm, I can see us walking slowly arm in arm...”

~Mark Cohn in True Companion

We need to nurture our rose garden. Prune it, water it, ignore the thorns that draw blood.

My name is not important here. If I need to introduce my voice then I am a lecturer of English in a residential college for women. When I see the fresh young faces of the girls who arrive, most of whom are from backward communities, I wonder what destiny has in store for them.

A marriage is beautiful like a rose garden, but there are so many roses and so many thorns. And the fragrance beckons to us from far off. So also a good marriage which has to be nurtured like a rose garden. Not all roses need the same kind of caring. I have many roses in my garden, and every day when I wake up, and walk in my rose garden, I cannot help but think of the young girls as delicate rose buds. What will be their destiny? Who will hold their hand?

Marriage is still the most important thing in life for a boy or girl, irrespective of their social standing, career or even their sexual orientation. Which is why I call it: The Garden of roses. Roses do not come with their thorns, but they do not fail to bloom. They bloom and bloom and fill the garden and the home with their own fragrance.

Most of the perfume bouquets have rose as the main note, because roses are roses. But if I am not careful when I walk in my garden each day, the thorns snare my clothes or my fingers as I cut the blossoms for the vases.

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"Marriages are made in Heaven". How I pray when I go to the temple. For good in my own marriage, the marriages of my children and a good husband for my third daughter. Marriage is a bond between two souls for many lifetimes. I have heard these words a million times over from so many people: parents, teachers, friends, colleagues.

Roses and rosebuds greet me as I walk through my garden in the morning. The early morning Sun signifies a new day and a new beginning. The roses are yet to fully bloom but they are enjoying the warmth of the rising sun.

I choose rosebuds for the bride and groom: The white purity of the girl and the palest of red for the boy, not the bright red or vibrant red, just touching the fringes of the petals, a little more experienced in life by virtue of his gender. Is this the same in every Society?

When I see the roses blooming each day, a little more exposed to the world and a little more beautiful, I think how fascinating creation is. Parents have children, boys and girls and like these roses they take their time to bloom into young and innocent adults, slowly petal by petal. Life, it is said, begins after marriage. For a rosebud, life begins as soon as she is born. She belongs to someone else, elsewhere. She is taught to be the ideal daughter-in-law. That is the world I live in, to this day, 2021 is also like this, 2022 also will be like this. This is what the future holds for the normal folk. Life throws the girls to the wind and the sun and she opens a little more and then there are so many factors that consider and judge her for the biggest challenge in life: Marriage. Marriage is the bramble bush, that knocks her around and she survives it. Because, she has to.

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I will not say that academicians are intellectuals, but we see so many young bright minds that we are inspired to do the best for them. I feel it everyday, my colleagues feel it everyday. However, in life, we do not get the opportunity to help and change the day to day living of all of them. Schooling is only part of it.

In the place where we live, which is part of coastal Andhra, marriage is as early as eighteen and as late as twentyfive. I have two married daughters and the third is an engineer in government service. All my daughters have professional degrees. I myself have been working for --- years. And little has transpired in those years for me to state that the state of women and married women has changed for the better.

Marriage is a social institution and a fine one. I like being married, as do so many other women and men. It offers a security blanket. But, like a rose garden, we have to nurture every aspect of the marriage because a marriage is a bouquet of several relationships. It is not just a wedding with beautiful clothes, good food and plenty of laughter.

"Loving does not at first mean merging, surrendering, and uniting with another person ... Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distance exists, a marvelous living side-by-side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of seeing each other as a whole before an immense sky." — Rainer Maria Rilke

In my own relationship, my husband and I have absolutely tried to make it work, despite all the hurdles we had to face. We have grown up and grown older.. And having experienced the institution of

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marriage myself and having watched my daughters, I have begun to realise that the world may be scientifically advanced but the emotional dilemmas that a newly-wed girl faces remain the same, and never have changed through the generations.

If marriage is a social system, then is it truly based on love? Love is not just chemistry and attraction. True love happens when two people share their lives and nurture each other's dreams. Are arranged marriages based on love? The boy, comes with his expectations, the family has its own demands. Who checks whether the dreams of the girl are at least met half-way? And still we bow our heads and comply with complete faith to the vows of marriage. We try to be the best wife, mother and daughter-in-law. Our societies have demanded it from us. It is coded into our native genes.

A woman in a marriage is often caught in the middle, because self-sacrifice is equated to being a good mother and a good wife. Not many will ever question, even many women will never question whether a woman will ever realise that she too deserves to be cared for- by herself and by her family.

It does not mean that women do not give in a marriage because every relationship is based on a give and take.

I often wonder whether there is a line that separates the right kind of giving from the over-zealous and often guilt-ridden way of giving because women are expected to nurture, no matter what.

And I have seen in these past so many years, young girls of greater intelligence being married off to boys, and sometimes we get to hear about them after they are married, sometimes we do not.

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The young couple start the journey with lots of optimism. Their marriage is a new day rising with the dawning sun. In their journey, they face ups and downs with confidence, spirituality, understanding, and a belief system to overcome and lead a joyful life for a lifetime like a beautiful rose garden fragrant aroma spreading around. Roses. Beautiful, lovely fragrance of rainbow coloured roses with gentle tender leaves, that is what they both are, ...blooming buds of childish ignorance.

Forty years ago, the man was still the breadwinner of the family. Now, the families have to grapple with the fact that the girl who is the newest member of the family is also sharing the spotlight as the main breadwinner. It is not easy to accept or adjust to this reality. It is not easy for the family and it is not easy for the girl. If she does not work but is educated, it is a problem for the girl because she is expected to be nurturing enough to serve with a smile.

That is what I see in each innocent face as I teach them language. I try to teach them communication which is an entirely different gamut. Because, without communication skills, all languages are a waste. A girl has to learn to communicate her needs and her wishes. She has to be a diplomat, someone who can say no as if she is saying yes.

Saying no is not an option that Indian women have been taught or been encouraged to use.

Of what purpose is an education that does not teach women self-reliance? Financial independence is a diaphanous entity. It is a veneer, because it does not ensure a blessed married life.

During Sankranti, we celebrate the pagan ritual of Gobbamalu and we pray for good husbands and families. I wish to say that we should pray. But we should also learn to charioteer our lives in the direction we want to walk. And that aspect, schooling does not teach us. Education does not teach us.

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We are not our western counterparts. We live our Indian lives in a cultural environment that is Indian. And that is the challenge in our rose gardens. Because caterpillars eat up the leaves and buds. We have to learn to navigate them.

Caught in a marriage of uncertainty are also those women who are employed but do not have financial independence. It is a catch22 situation to be happy ever after. While there is nothing wrong to expect women to come home to a family and cook up a seven course meal and look fresh and happy as they help the kids do homework and cater to every need of the family, there is something that is very dystopian about this kind of a woman we see in the advertisements on television and in magazines. Is this because marriages are between families? Arranged marriages are always alliances between families.

No one said it better than William Carlos Williams in his poem, Marriage:

So different, this man

And this woman:

A stream flowing

In a field.

Do you want to know the world that I see everyday? I still see a lot of arranged marriages and few marriages that are a matter of love or attraction. Inter-caste marriages are very few. Everyone is looking for good girls who are willing to adjust and are sweet natured enough to blend into the families they

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marry into. Soft-spoken and dexterous, capable of doing everything to make everyone's lives comfortable. A woman should be like salt that tastes sweet. Soluble and small enough to serve a greater demand. In the great Indian wedding, the roses are roses, and they come to check on the rosebud that is the girl. They forget their own rosebud years.

Until a bride settles into her new life as a wife and comes into her own as a mother, she cannot get away from the unease that may be like the feeling of the young students who come to school on the first day. Is it not natural?

After marriage, especially women realise that we view the world differently, the world looks at us differently and time moves differently. The first year of marriage is always difficult. It is like being cut from the rosebush and being fit into a vase of many different flowers, all roses of different kinds, and trying to fit in. This kind of displacement has nothing to do with scholastic achievements or career.

In the past decades, women have outpaced men in education and financial growth. Unfortunately, the fabric of life has not progressed enough to accommodate the new facet of women, who are independent enough to think for themselves.

In the society that I live in, the chances of fitting into a family a woman has married into are fifty-fifty. There is no reassurance to women. Walking out of marriage is not an option they like. A woman who has walked out of marriage is thought of as being loose-charactered.

Much more pathetic is the world of the woman who can be financially independent but is not. She holds a job and earns well. But she does not enjoy even a part of her earnings. She earns and the others spend.

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These are the thorns in her world.

Social acceptance is one thing. Because, society demands certain things from a woman. Acceptance in the family we marry into is another thing altogether. Without the support of our husbands, it is a downward struggle. Which is why, I once again reiterate that communication skills and diplomacy are things that girls have to be taught. If not through watching the older women in their families then by women who are capable of doing so. But who does a woman seek help from? Because, after she has changed her last name, she is a different person. Her parents treat her differently. They had washed the feet of the bridegroom and given her away. She is still their daughter but she's someone else's family member. She no longer belongs to the family she has been born in. And that changes everything. The family she marries into takes time in accepting her into their fold.

On one hand girls are encouraged to study well and be well employed, but on the other hand the girl and parents feel the pressure of having to get her married at the right age.

What is the right age for marriage?

Does being married at the correct age mean that the girl will have a fruitful and happy life?

In the past, getting married meant that it improved the financial status of women, but now, with women working too, does that hold true? Is the future of the girl secured by getting her married at the correct age? Why is there both social and peer pressure to marry at a certain age?

The sun sings the petals of the rosebud.

Every culture in the world gives importance to marriage and everyone seeks an eligible consort. Rich, poor, educated, tribal ... every society deems marriage as an important stage in a person's life.

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In arranged marriages, which are still prevalent in the society I live in, people place a lot of importance on finding the right match. Right family background, right horoscope match, right behaviour.

And yet, it seems as if the onus is more on the girl and her family.

The day of marriage dawns with a golden sunrise that colours the rosebud in golden pink and her betrothed in a golden red of youthful vitality. There are so many people in the marriage pandal, the fragrance of all these roses among the jasmine and rosewater that is sprinkled on the guests.

The marriage is a colourful garden of blessings, music and frenzied delight.

Rituals start with kanyadaanam (girl given away to the boy) with a heavy heart, the girl is given to another family. Parents have a lot of affection, love, care and their child who was until now their ray of hope and delight will be kept in another person's care. All these emotions are covered up in smiling acceptance and delight at the jangle of many coloured glass bangles, red, green, orange...each carries its own auspicious symbolical meaning. The mangalsutra is tied around the bride's neck. She belongs to the bridegroom.

What does the bridegroom wear around his neck as a symbolic meaning of who he belongs to? Does he belong to his wife in the Indian cultural context?

A good son is a good rosebud, but he is not yet a husband yet and still is a son. Is the pink rosebud of his wife a good daughter-in-law, she is a good daughter, but he does not know much about his wife yet.

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Every parent expects their child to be happy all through life. Every parent somehow is brainwashed to think that daughters are ParayaDhan.

Why not encourage our girl child instead of trying to teach our daughters to be ideal daughters-in-law? For decades now, despite there being an uptrend in the fields of education and career, when it comes to traditions which are the founding blocks of any society, there is not much to be said about changing the customs to support the evolving societies. Women still have to comply with age-old traditions. Many women with only girls are asked why they do not try once to conceive once more so that they can be blessed with a son. Because girls are Paraya Dhan.

We women as children are taught the same values as the boys. We are taught to be honest, have a belief system and values. Then we grow up and get married.

Even today, the rural mindset has not changed much. Once the girl is of an marriageable age, the elders of the family prefer to get the girl married. Not much importance is accorded to the girl's opinion.

The Elders' decision is final, usually. Not all parents are like that. But society exerts its own pressures.

In lower middle class families, the girl stops education as per her parents' wishes when she is 14,16 or 18 and they give her up in marriage without any career or job. This is my major concern as an educator.

How can a girl who is not allowed to go to school and learn, be capable of thinking on her own terms?

Earning is not difficult if the girl is enterprising. But what if the circumstances and the family she is married into is not the kind that helps and supports her. Is marriage the only thing in a girl's life? Is

doing something to earn an income beyond looking after children and family only for the sake of financial gain? What about self-confidence and personal growth?

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Getting married within the family so that the inherited properties do not fall into the hands of others is a big thing. This, despite there being enough proof that third generation marriages in the family can produce children who are having physical disabilities. Generations get along with this type of marriage. Even jewellery is given from generation to generation. Is a girl married into the family to preserve the assets a piece of jewellery?

Despite courts and laws, many people refuse to share inheritances with women, because they have been married and no longer are part of the same family. Will not an inheritance make her financially more secure than she already is? Why do the sons get to share the inheritance? Why are the girls ignored?

Why should opulent weddings be the recourse to show the status of the families? Is it not better that the married couple are gifted with a small home so that they do not immediately have to set up a home or rent one? Marriage for 5 days or a week, celebrating all the days and exchanging gifts is more for showing off the fact that both families are rich enough.

Every girl is a rose bud, every bridegroom is a young rose. Roses are always fragrant. How we all wish that the Marriage is à bed of fragrant roses. We celebrate the coming together on a bed of rose petals. And the petals get trampled on.

What collected as the drops of dew on her gentle self of a bud have vapourised and all that lingers is the harsh reality of an afternoon sun. What is the rose bud with red tipped petals, who is her husband and what is he doing as her white petals turn red, the pain and hurt reflected in the colour of blood is a

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speck of vermillion on her forehead. Was he not supposed to be the power of red in her life, the vermillion that was her commitment to him and his ownership of everything that was her? Where was he when she needed his comforting presence, when the thorns tore her and laughed with the wind, when the other roses in her vase garden were mute and silent, for reasons unknown to her. Were they too not young and innocent once?

If anything, she has to learn about her life all on her own.

A favourite quote by Joyce Meyer comes to mind:

Our world has created a false unrealistic image of what women are supposed to look like and act like. But the truth is that every woman was not created by God to be skinny, with a flawless complexion and long flowing hair. Not every woman was intended to juggle a career as well as all of the other duties of being a wife, mother, citizen, and daughter. Single women should not be made to feel they are missing something because they are not married. Married women should not be made to feel they must have a career to be complete. We must have the freedom to be our individual selves.

That will be the day, when every Indian woman can be herself and be dictated by her own inner self.

There is an inner compass in everyone that points to what is right. When women are encouraged to be themselves, why will they have any reason other than to follow their own inner compass?

And will they not nurture their marriages, rose gardens notwithstanding? I think we all will.