

Marriage—West vs East: A Social Contract or a Spiritual Bond

BY

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Abstract

Marriage, as a fundamental social institution, varies dramatically across cultures, reflecting deeper philosophical, religious, and cultural values. This article examines the contrasting approaches to marriage between Western and Eastern societies, where Western traditions increasingly view marriage as a contractual arrangement focused on individual rights and personal fulfillment, while Eastern traditions maintain marriage as a spiritual bond encompassing families, communities, and cosmic harmony. Through comparative analysis, this study explores the historical foundations, contemporary perspectives, and modern challenges facing both paradigms.

Key words: Marriage, Social institution, Western societies, Eastern societies, Cultural values

Introduction

Marriage represents one of humanity's most enduring and complex social arrangements, transcending mere legal documentation or ceremonial ritual. The institution varies dramatically across culture and continents, reflecting fundamental differences in how human relationships, individual autonomy, and social responsibility are understood and prioritized (Coontz, 2005).

Recent genetic research has provided fascinating insights into human ancestry, with studies identifying a "Y-chromosomal Adam" and "Mitochondrial Eve" as the most recent common male and female ancestors of all living humans (Poznik et al., 2013; Behar et al., 2008). While these findings align with concepts of common ancestry, it is important to note that these ancestors lived at different points in time and represent scientific rather than biblical constructs.

The dichotomy between Western and Eastern approaches to marriage reveals fundamental differences in philosophical foundations. Western societies have increasingly embraced marriage as a contractual arrangement focused on individual rights, personal fulfillment, and legal protections, while Eastern traditions often maintain marriage as a spiritual bond that extends beyond the couple to encompass families, communities, and cosmic harmony (Cherlin, 2004; Kakar, 2003).

Historical Foundations and Cultural Evolution

Western Philosophical Traditions

The Western understanding of marriage has evolved significantly from its ancient roots. In classical Greek and Roman societies, marriage primarily served as a political and economic arrangement designed to consolidate power and property (Treggiari, 1991). The influence of Christianity introduced the concept of marriage as a

sacrament—a sacred covenant blessed by divine authority—providing spiritual significance while maintaining social and economic functions (Reynolds, 1994).

The Enlightenment period marked a crucial turning point in Western thought about marriage. Philosophers like John Locke emphasized individual rights, personal autonomy, and social contract theory, ideas that gradually permeated marriage practices and led to the contemporary Western view of marriage as a voluntary association between equal partners (Stone, 1977).

The Industrial Revolution further transformed Western marriage by shifting economic production from household – based to factory – based systems. This change reduced the economic necessity of marriage while increasing opportunities for individual economic independence, particularly for women, resulting in an emphasis on romantic love, personal compatibility, and individual fulfillment (Shorter, 1975).

Eastern Philosophical Traditions

Eastern approaches to marriage are deeply rooted in ancient philosophical and religious traditions that emphasize interconnectedness, duty, and cosmic harmony. In Hindu philosophy, marriage is considered one of the essential life stages (ashramas) that contributes to spiritual development and social order, extending beyond physical union to encompass the joining of souls across lifetimes with the ultimate goal of mutual spiritual evolution (Pandey, 1969).

Buddhist traditions view marriage as an opportunity for practicing compassion, mindfulness, and the cultivation of

wisdom, emphasizing the reduction of suffering through mutual support and understanding rather than individual gratification (Harvey, 2000). Confucian philosophy in East Asia emphasizes marriage as a cornerstone of social harmony, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities that contribute to the stability of both family and society (Ebrey, 1993).

These philosophical foundations have created marriage systems that prioritize collective well-being over individual desires, long-term stability over short-term satisfaction, and spiritual growth over material benefits. The arranged marriage tradition, still prevalent in many Eastern societies, reflects these values by emphasizing compatibility of families, social backgrounds, and spiritual beliefs rather than romantic attraction alone (Hamon & Ingoldsby, 2003).

Contemporary Perspectives: Rights versus Responsibilities Western Emphasis on Individual Rights

Modern Western societies have increasingly framed marriage in terms of individual rights and legal protections. This perspective views marriage as a social contract providing access to numerous legal benefits, including inheritance rights, medical decision-making authority, tax advantages, and immigration benefits (Giddens, 1992). The fight for marriage equality, particularly for same-sex couples, has been largely argued on the basis of equal access to these legal protections and social recognition (Eskridge, 2002).

This rights-based approach reflects broader Western values of individual autonomy, equality, and personal freedom. The concept of "no-fault" divorce, prenuptial agreements, and cohabitation as an alternative to marriage all reflect this contractual understanding of intimate relationships (Cherlin, 2004).

However, critics argue that this approach has led to diminished commitment and increased divorce rates. The emphasis on individual fulfillment and personal happiness may undermine the stability and permanence that marriage traditionally provided (Popenoe, 1996).

Eastern Emphasis on Collective Responsibility

Eastern societies generally maintain a more collective approach to marriage, emphasizing the responsibilities and duties that marriage entails rather than the rights it provides. Marriage is viewed as a social institution serving not only the couple but also their extended families and broader community (Kakar, 2003).

The joint family system, still common in many Eastern societies, reflects this collective approach. Marriage brings together not just two individuals but two families, creating networks of mutual support and obligation. The success of a

marriage is measured not only by the happiness of the couple but also by their contribution to family harmony, care of elderly parents, and the raising of children who will continue family traditions (Uberoi, 2006).

This approach emphasizes the spiritual and karmic dimensions of marriage. In Hindu tradition, marriage is believed to create spiritual bonds that transcend the current lifetime, with the concept of "dharma" (righteous duty) governing marital relationships (Pandey, 1969).

The Role of Love and Arranged Marriages Western Romantic Individualism

Western marriage culture has been profoundly influenced by the concept of romantic love as the primary basis for marriage. This emphasis on emotional compatibility, physical attraction, and personal chemistry has created a marriage system that prioritizes individual choice and personal fulfillment (Giddens, 1992).

While this romantic individualism has led to greater gender equality and reduced forced marriages, it has also created unrealistic expectations about marriage. The belief that love should be effortless and that marriages should provide constant happiness has contributed to higher divorce rates and decreased commitment to working through marital difficulties (Coontz, 2005).

Eastern Wisdom and Arranged Marriages

The practice of arranged marriages, common in many Eastern societies, reflects a different understanding of love and compatibility. Rather than beginning with romantic attraction, arranged marriages are based on the belief that love can be cultivated through shared experiences, mutual respect, and commitment to common goals (Hamon & Ingoldsby, 2003).

This approach emphasizes the importance of family wisdom, social compatibility, and practical considerations in creating successful marriages. Studies have shown that arranged marriages often develop strong emotional bonds over time, with couples reporting increasing satisfaction and love as their marriages mature (Xiaohu & Whyte, 1990).

Spiritual Dimensions and Sacred Bonds Eastern Spiritual Frameworks

Eastern religious and philosophical traditions imbue marriage with profound spiritual significance. In Hinduism, marriage is considered one of the sixteen sacred rituals (samskaras) that mark important life transitions, with the ceremony itself rich in spiritual symbolism representing the union of masculine and feminine principles and the creation of new karmic bonds (Pandey, 1969).

Buddhism emphasizes the importance of compassion, mindfulness, and wisdom in marriage relationships. The practice of loving-kindness (metta) and the cultivation of equanimity help couples navigate the inevitable challenges of married life with grace and understanding (Harvey, 2000).

Western Secular and Religious Perspectives

Western approaches to the spiritual dimensions of marriage vary significantly between secular and religious communities. Traditional Christian marriage maintains strong spiritual elements, with marriage viewed as a sacrament reflecting the relationship between Christ and the Church (Reynolds, 1994).

However, secular Western society has largely removed spiritual elements from marriage, focusing instead on emotional compatibility, personal fulfillment, and legal protections. This secularization has led to more flexible approaches to marriage but may have also reduced the sense of sacred commitment that traditionally sustained marriages through difficult periods (Cherlin, 2004).

Economic and Social Implications Western Economic Individualism

The Western approach to marriage reflects broader economic values of individual achievement, personal responsibility, and market-based relationships. Marriage is often viewed as a partnership that should enhance the economic well-being of both partners through shared resources, tax benefits, and career support (Giddens, 1992).

This economic individualism has led to more egalitarian marriages where both partners contribute financially and share domestic responsibilities. However, this approach has also created new challenges, with the emphasis on individual career success potentially conflicting with family responsibilities (Hochschild, 1989).

Eastern Collective Economics

Eastern societies often maintain more collective approaches to marriage economics, with extended families providing support and resources to help couples establish their marriages. The joint family system creates economic networks that provide security and support but also create obligations and dependencies (Uberoi, 2006).

Modern Challenges and Future Directions

Both Western and Eastern approaches to marriage face significant challenges in the modern world. Globalization, urbanization, and changing social norms have created pressures that require adaptation of traditional marriage practices (Cherlin, 2004).

Western societies are grappling with declining marriage rates, increasing divorce rates, and changing family structures. Eastern societies are dealing with the tension between traditional values and modern pressures, with urbanization weakening extended family networks and increased education and economic opportunities for women leading to changing expectations about marriage roles and responsibilities (Kakar, 2003).

Conclusion

The comparison between Western and Eastern approaches to marriage reveals fundamental differences in how human relationships, individual autonomy, and social responsibility are understood and prioritized. While Western societies have increasingly embraced marriage as a contractual arrangement focused on individual rights and personal fulfillment, Eastern traditions maintain marriage as a spiritual bond encompassing families, communities, and cosmic harmony.

Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses. The Western emphasis on individual choice and equality has led to more egalitarian marriages and greater personal freedom, but may have also reduced commitment and stability. The Eastern emphasis on collective responsibility and spiritual growth provides stability and support but may limit individual autonomy and personal fulfillment.

The challenge for modern societies is to find ways to combine the best elements of both traditions—the personal freedom and equality valued in Western culture with the spiritual depth and collective support found in Eastern traditions. The future of marriage may lie not in choosing between Western and Eastern approaches, but in creating new models that integrate the wisdom of both traditions while addressing the challenges of contemporary life.

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