

The Institution of Marriage in Islam and present day situation:

(A Practical Guide for Marriage Counselors)

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“...He (Allah) has created mates for you from your own kind that you may find peace in them and He has set between you love and compassion...” [Qur’an, 30: 21]

Marital relationship and union between genders is a natural and universal phenomenon across all living beings for their multiplication. That is how the human civilization has come into being and continues to grow:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا

O men! Fear your Lord Who created you from a single being and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread many men and women...”
[Q, 4: 1]

Marriage is a formal recognition of a conjugal association by witnessing a commitment two individuals of opposite genders make to each other; thereby establishing their social status as a couple in the society. Mutual

respect and a gentle relationship are the lifelines of a prosperous matrimonial companionship, raising an ordered and stable family, and advancing the cause of human society.

Society is paramount in Islam. Families are its building blocks. They determine its dynamics, health, progress, and priorities. Its strength and robustness depend on how strong and exuberant the families are. Since a compassionate and caring spousal relationship is critical to a family's well-being, stability, and integrity, Islam considers this relationship as the most sacred bond between spouses. This bond is vital to raising a disciplined family and advancing the security and prosperity of society. It is most sacred because, unlike other ties, it is by choice and most intimate. It is a trust. The Quran uses the metaphor of garment to describe the closeness between spouses:

أَحِلَّ لَكُمْ لَيْلَةَ الصِّيَامِ الرَّفَثُ إِلَى نِسَائِكُمْ هُنَّ لِبَاسٌ لَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لِبَاسٌ لَهُنَّ عَلِمَ اللَّهُ أَنَّكُمْ كُنْتُمْ تَخْتَانُونَ أَنْفُسَكُمْ فَتَابَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَعَفَا عَنْكُمْ فَالآنَ بَاشِرُوهُنَّ وَابْتَغُوا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا حَتَّى يَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمُ الْخَيْطُ الْأَبْيَضُ مِنَ الْخَيْطِ الْأَسْوَدِ مِنَ الْفَجْرِ ثُمَّ أَتَمُوا الصِّيَامَ إِلَى اللَّيْلِ وَلَا تُبَاشِرُوهُنَّ وَأَنْتُمْ عَاكِفُونَ فِي الْمَسَاجِدِ تِلْكَ حُدُودُ اللَّهِ فَلَا تَقْرَبُوهَا كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ آيَاتِهِ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ

“...*They (women) are your garment, and you (men) are theirs...*” [Q, 2: 187].

Just as nothing intervenes between body and clothes, nothing can intervene between husband and wife. Like clothes, they protect each other's privacy, make up for their imperfections, provide warmth and comfort, elevate their rank and honor in society, and bring to fruition their married life.

Preserving the institution of marriage is central to the healthy continuation of human civilization. Given its consequential significance, Islam has formulated marital laws on extremely sound principles. The Qur'an clearly and equitably specifies the rights and obligations of both spouses:

وَالْمُطَلَّاتُ يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنْفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ قُرُوءٍ وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَهُنَّ أَنْ يَكْتُمْنَ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ فِي أَرْحَامِهِنَّ إِنْ كُنَّ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَبُعُولَتُهُنَّ أَحَقُّ بِرَدِّهِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ إِنْ أَرَادُوا إِصْلَاحًا وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ دَرَجَةٌ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

“...And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them...”
[Q, 2: 228]

Full provisions have been provided for the protection and delivery of these rights by alerting both parties to the union:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا

“O People... keep your duty to your Lord, by Whom you demand one of another your rights and to the ties of relationship... Allah is ever watcher over you.” [Q, 4:1]

The major objective of marriage in Islam is the preservation of morality. Islam denounces *zina* (fornication and adultery) as the most heinous and severely punishable social crime. It urges both man and woman to subject their relationship to a code of law, that protects morality against indecency and guards civilization against chaos. Thus, marriage is a shield against any assault on chastity and human dignity, as the Prophet Muhammad SAW featured it in his advice to young people:

“Young men! Those of you who can afford to get married should do so. Marriage is the best check for lustful eyes and an effective help to maintain chastity...” [Bukhari, Muslim]

Another objective of marriage is to provide a bond of kindness between husband and wife:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“...He (Allah) created mates for you from yourself that you might find peace of mind in them and He put between you love and compassion...” [Q, 30: 21]

This is crucial because together they are responsible for advancing the purposes that the human civilization seeks to accomplish through marriage. Love and care enable them to live a happy life and inspire them with the needed strength, impulse, and perseverance to raise a family and advance higher social and moral values.

Having defined the objectives of marriage, Islam provides clear rules and guidelines that must be followed to achieve these objectives and to ensure that a stable and harmonious family atmosphere prevails at home and thrives. Both parties to this bond are obligated to comply with the principles of marriage. In a nutshell, the husband is like a shepherd responsible for providing physical, economic, and emotional security, and creating an environment of moral discipline at home by being a role model and caring mentor. The wife is required to protect her chastity and honor and property (including children) of her husband. Other chores of family life are left up to the individuals to sort out as appropriate, according to their strengths, needs, and circumstances.

The collective impact of the family units on the surroundings cannot be overstated. A strong family structure is the first step in building a just, balanced, and flourishing society. Only such a society is capable of coping with the social problems that take various forms. Islam views such problems very seriously and prevents them at the family level by disciplining the spouses and holding them responsible for any undesirable social behavior:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا قُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ عَلَيْهَا مَلَائِكَةٌ
غِلَاطٌ شِدَادٌ لَا يَعْصُونَ اللَّهَ مَا أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ

“Believers! Save yourselves and your families from a fire whose fuel will be men and stones...” [Q, 66: 6]

Thus, marriage in Islam is not just for emotional gratification; its purpose is much higher and nobler, which is to advance the human race and build and promote a socially and morally sound and orderly society, where every individual has equal opportunity to excel and rise freely to their potential. In such a society, each member becomes a valued asset. With this perspective, the marital practice in Islam is regarded as a form of worship. It is a Prophetic act for practicing piety in real physical life.

To underline the magnitude of marriage as an institution for fulfilling the critical needs of humanity, the Prophet SAW refers to it to himself:

“Marriage is from my tradition; whoever turns his face away from my tradition does not belong to me...” [Bukhari]

He ties a Muslim’s Islamic status to the practice of marriage: *“When a person marries, he completes half of his religion (Faith); let him take awe in Allah concerning the other half.”* [Tirmidhi]

Stated differently, making marriage stand strong by fulfilling its obligations amounts to practicing the entire Islam. Based on their righteous behavior, he describes the ranks of men and women.

He says: *“The best among you is he who is best to his family, and I am the best of you to my family...”* [Tirmidhi]

Among the top priority items included in his Final Address was congeniality between spouses. He admonished gender balance. Let it be clear. Dismissing the politics of equality, a balance is a visionary optimization of the pertinent interactive components in any universe, resulting in the most desirable outcome. Where it matters, the quality cannot be compromised for quantity.

In particular, he instructed men to go the extra mile: *“Treat your women with kindness, for they are your committed companions.”* Regarding women, he raised their status to the most precious and irreplaceable treasure in the world:

“The world and all things in it are valuable, but the most precious thing in the world is a virtuous woman.” [Ahmad, Muslim]

These virtues enable the spouses to give meaning to their marriage as a gift of Allah SWT and transform their union into an impactful family. An aggregate of such families carves the path to a strong and noble society.

It is a serial and transgenerational effort to build and sustain a harmonious and disciplined society. It is worth repeating that the stability of marriage depends on warm and durable relations between spouses built on mutual respect and fairness. Education is by imitation.

Similarly, the development of a child's personality in a family is largely a projection of parents' interactions between themselves and their children. It is, thus, imperative that the parents are adequately disciplined. No human being, however intelligent, can comprehend all human characteristics of man and woman to be able to prescribe comprehensive rules to govern them amicably. This domain solely belongs to the Creator. Taking into account their personality traits, and consistent with their needs and roles, Allah SWT has specified guidelines for both that would, in His wisdom, weave them together functionally and emotionally to secure a systematic progression of human civilization. Acceptance of this viewpoint is in recognition of the natural order, and marriage is an institution to enforce that order.

Surging since 1960, the population of Muslims in the U.S. is estimated to be five million. Most have emigrated from their Muslim cultures in search of a prosperous life. Generally, well-educated, career-oriented, and financially established, they are now in their fourth generation. Their number one priority is to elevate the socio-economic status of their children through quality education, and, to a lesser degree, to keep their Islamic orientation. Notwithstanding the ranking of their priorities, a healthy and peaceful home environment is a prerequisite for achieving these goals, nevertheless.

Every society has its own strengths and weaknesses. It is up to individuals to pick and choose what they value and perceive as good for them in the long run. The celebrated strength of this society is the freedom of choice, and its weakness is its abuse. Sadly, Muslims, by and large, tend to be more indifferent to the virtues of this society than to its ills. As they assimilated into the American lifestyle, initially for material gains, many could not remain unsusceptible to the social and moral detriments that have become ingrained in the texture of the Western culture. As they get focused entirely on worldly cultivation, their Islamic perspective is withering away gradually in zeal for conformity.

One obvious impact of this is on the attitude of the young generation toward marriage as an institution that protects family values and the moral code of life. Many young minds are getting influenced by the TV culture, social media, and their peers. They are drifting towards non-Islamic patterns of life. They are shaping their lives, like their

mainstream peers, in the mold of big-name models, and falling into the trap of fancy Western jargon and weird concepts toward marriage. They take little pride in their values and show no difference in their lifestyle over their counterparts in the larger society. While staying single is becoming fashionable, dating, dancing, drinking, and substance use is not off-limits. It is seeping into our culture. Mixing and mingling between unrelated opposite genders is not an uncommon scene anymore at most social and even religious events, including major Islamic conventions where care used to be taken to respect gender privacy. It neither is modernism nor is it progress; it is rather a capitulation of self-esteem and the standards we stand for.

Still, a more perplexing occurrence is that many Muslim young men are getting involved with non-Muslim females and marrying them in total disregard to what Islam expects of them and the conditions it places on such an arrangement. Often, they are driven by pure lust, rather than piety in the other party or compatibility in values. Often justification is offered that Islam allows marrying women of the '*People of the Book* (Christians and Jews).' Oddly, they misconstrue the Qur'an and the spirit behind this concession just to cover their acts and blind-sightedness toward their sanity. Undeniably, permission is granted; but should be used conscientiously if the circumstances require.

The backlash of this often unscrupulous behavior displayed by Muslim males is that many young Muslim women, who are in no way less than their non-Muslim counterparts, cannot find suitable matches for marriage. Some even question Islam's parity between genders that, unlike men, they are not allowed to marry people of other Faiths. Under a frazzled mindset, it is difficult for them to comprehend the Wisdom of Allah SWT behind this restriction for their protection. Tragically, in marginal cases, Muslim women are finding non-Muslim spouses, despite a clear prohibition of such a union. Token acceptance of Islam by the prospective spouse is conveniently considered sufficient to move forward. Of course, where such an acceptance is genuine with full conviction and understanding of what Islam stands for and expects from a Muslim, the marriage is perfectly legitimate. Today, it is not difficult to find Muslim women living with husbands who are still Christians, Jews, or even Hindus. This trend will continue and spiral unless Muslim communities adopt measures to guide young people persuasively. Special

seminars on marriage, family values, and marital laws, geared toward young people and in coordination with them, maybe helpful before they make up their mind. Likely, they are more receptive to their accomplished peers. That talent is usually available in some measure and must be tapped into. It has a dual effect: Self-reinforcement and grooming the equals. Without such guardrails, any culture or society is bound to dissipate.

Until recently, Muslims used to proudly talk to their American friends about their strong family values and traditions. Regrettably, that posture is now changing. The statistics of family disputes and domestic violence in many Muslim communities are steadily rising. Muslim families are experiencing marital disorder and physical abuse. Many spouses, who the Qur'an calls each other's garment, are exposing each other in Police Reports and Courtrooms. Bitter legal divorces and fights over child custody are leaving many families torn apart emotionally, socially, and financially.

Tragically, the innocent victims of family discord are children. They are deprived of parental protection, affection, and guidance. Their lives are shattered. They lose the joy of their childhood, live in fear of insecurity, and face diminished prospects for a bright future. National statistics on the social behavior of children from broken or dysfunctional families are frightening. Just this thought alone can save many marriages and children in recognition of Allah's abhorrence toward divorce. We must be a part of the solution, not a problem. By melting in their mold, we offer them nothing. Instead, we can reinforce family ties and durability, brightens children's future, and stabilize society.

These problems can be attributed to mainly incompatible personalities, cultural conflicts, material obsession, unrestrained freedom, and job-related stress. Intrinsically, however, deviation from the Islamic norms is the prime reason. Ignorance about own values and duties, and disrespect toward the other party can only result in a dysfunctional marriage and a chaotic family environment. Only a strong Islamic character that condemns violence and disorder in any setting, and emphasizes a conscience-driven generous conduct can transform a marriage into a sound and resounding family.

Islam is a natural and realistic system of life. It does not expect any individual to live in an unhappy or abusive relationship. It allows the dissolution of marriage if it becomes untenable. Divorce is an option if all paths to reconciliation have been exhausted. It is the last resort so people do not invoke it recklessly. It is permissible because, in some extenuating circumstances, this may be the least undesirable outlet.

Parties must do everything possible to work out their differences and save the marriage. Just as marriage is half of Islam, divorce is most hated by Allah SWT, warns the Prophet SAW:

“Of all the lawful acts the most detestable to Allah is divorce.” [Dawud]

One who fears Allah SWT and seeks His pleasure must be considerate and desist from terminating the marriage.

Whenever the relationship between husband and wife starts to break down, they should reach out to people of wisdom and maturity they trust and seek their facilitation. Allah SWT provides a framework for family counseling to mend the marriage:

وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ شِقَاقَ بَيْنِهِمَا فَابْعَثُوا حَكَمًا مِّنْ أَهْلِهِ وَحَكَمًا مِّنْ أَهْلِهَا إِنْ يُرِيدَا إِصْلَاحًا
يُوفِّقَ اللَّهُ بَيْنَهُمَا إِنْ اللَّهُ كَانَ عَلِيمًا خَبِيرًا

“If you fear a breach between the two, appoint an arbitrator from his people and an arbitrator from her people. If they both want to set things right, Allah will bring about reconciliation between them...”
[Q, 4: 35]

Every dispute can be resolved because the parties desire reconciliation and are willing to accommodate the other side. The prescribed principles or moral values cannot be compromised; everything else is negotiable.

Often, apprehensions and suspicions keep on mounting when the communication between the spouses breaks down. Some trusted person needs to break the ice of ego and facilitate dialogue between them to iron out their grievances sensibly.

Cutting off dialogue with a fellow Muslim is not permitted beyond three days:

“...It is not lawful for a Muslim to stop talking to his brother (or sister) for more than three days.” [Bukhari, Muslim]

Every attempt should be made for a settlement at the family level before the disruption of the matrimonial tie, rather than knocking on the door of the legal system for the judicial verdict. Typically, that is the beginning of the end.

To conclude, as the Qur’an stresses, marriage is a binding commitment to life itself, to society, and to the healthy survival of the human race. It is a commitment that spouses make to each other, as well as, to Allah SWT. In this commitment, they find mutual fulfillment, self-realization, dignity, social maturity, and purpose in life. Since marriage is a shield against indecent behavior, it is a tradition of Prophets and an act of piety to protect and promote the sanctity of human society.