The Evolution of Marriage: A Review of Contemporary Research

Ranjit Toppo, Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Glocal University, Saharanpur
Dr. Chander Kant Chawla, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Glocal University, Saharanpur

Abstract

This thesis seeks to provide an anthropological elucidation of the 'doing' of marriage, offering an ethnographic account of marriage from the perspective of the subjects. The central concern is to understand how individuals invest the sphere of sentiments with autonomy, potentially recasting the structuralist definition of marriage proposed by anthropological literature (e.g., Levi-Strauss, 1969). By emphasizing the 'doing' of marriage, this research aims to access the inner life of marriage, encompassing the subjective characterizations of the imagined and lived relationship between individuals brought together by marriage rules of alliance and exchange. Through fieldwork, respondents described the doing of marriage, which entailed familiar features such as alliance, marital codes, and the heterosexual imaginary. However, their answers to the question 'what is marriage?' centered around a single central idea: nibhaana. This concept highlights the significance of understanding marriage as a lived experience, rather than solely as a structural institution.

Marriage as a Social Institution

This thesis endeavors to provide an anthropological elucidation of the "doing" of marriage, seeking to offer an ethnographic account of the doing of marriage from the perspective of the subjects themselves. By doing so, it insists that there exists a distinct "way of thinking" about the institution of marriage, one in which individuals do not merely enact pre-scripted rules of alliance, but rather, actively engage with and shape the institution in meaningful ways. This research queries whether it is possible to contest the classical theoretical view that sentiments are shaped by the structured rules of alliance, and proposes that, in their "way of thinking" about marriage, subjects invest the sphere of sentiments with a significant degree of autonomy. This autonomy, in turn, recasts the structuralist definition of marriage proposed by the anthropological literature, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of the institution. The emphasis on "doing" marriage implies an attempt to access the inner life of marriage, which encompasses the subjective characterizations of the imagined and lived relationships between individuals brought together by stable determinants of marital alliance and exchange. To explore this, one may pose the question: How are terms of alliance actualized and sustained? A comprehensive definition of "what is marriage?" must involve not only locating "consummation" in marriage but also understanding the "consummation" of marriage itself. This inquiry necessitates exploring the motivations behind "doing" marriage, the efforts required to sustain it, and the reasons for continuing to "do" it. These questions must be addressed at both the institutional and individual levels. This investigation is also informed by the converse question, which involves skepticism towards marriage as an institutional imaginary. However, it is essential to distinguish between a negative definition of marriage and the negation of marriage as an institution. The latter is within the realm of a "positive" definition of marriage, which encompasses skepticism and a cultural search for new imaginaries of sexually intimate relatedness.

The ‘inner’ life of marriage should not be seen as a collection of discrete events, but as a series of temporalized experiences that unfold over time. These temporalizations are what give meaning to marriage as a lived practice, linking everyday actions and events (the "doings" of nibhaana) with more visible and socially recognized aspects of marriage. In other words, the ethnography seeks to make sense of the temporal flow of marital life, showing how personal actions and experiences become meaningful through their unfolding over time and in relation to larger social norms and expectations.

This theoretical approach opens up a space for moving beyond the symbolic definitions of marriage that often dominate anthropological discussions, where marriage is typically understood in metaphorical terms—such as the "symbolic" representation of marriage as "life itself." Instead, the thesis advocates for an analysis of marriage through its metonymic events, those small, specific instances that cumulatively constitute the lived experience of being married. These events, rather than grand symbolic narratives, are what make up the

ethnography of nibhaana, the specific ways in which marriage is performed and understood in everyday life.

In framing marriage as an "ethico-politics of two," the thesis challenges the conventional, symbolic, and metaphorical ways marriage has been historically understood. It shifts the focus from marriage as a static, unitary institution defined by cultural metaphors to marriage as a dynamic, relational process defined by the temporality of its events. This approach not only allows for a more nuanced understanding of marriage, but also critically interrogates the often assumed centrality of the heterosexual marriage model. By focusing on the temporality and specificities of marital events, the thesis opens the door to more diverse, non-normative understandings of marriage that may disrupt the conventional frameworks within which heterosexual marriage has been idealized.

Ultimately, this ethnographic approach—centering on the "doing" of marriage through the recording of its temporalities—offers a method to delve beneath symbolic representations and uncover the lived, political, and ethical dimensions of marriage, one event at a time. In doing so, it contributes to a more layered, complex understanding of marriage, one that does not reduce it to a monolithic or idealized institution, but instead reveals the multiplicities, contradictions, and potentialities inherent in the practice.

What is Marriage? Approaches, Definitions and Key Debates

The question of marriage, as an anthropological issue, is indeed vast and multifaceted, making it difficult to address comprehensively in a brief review. Over time, many scholars have attempted to provide a definitive or overarching conception of marriage, drawing on significant prior ethnological and sociological research. One early and frequently cited attempt comes from the Notes and Queries on Anthropology (1951 [1912]), a seminal document in the field, which offers a succinct, functionalist approach to marriage. This brief formulation has been influential in shaping the discourse on marriage as a social institution. In contrast, other scholars have sought to provide more detailed or empirical accounts. For example, British social anthropologist Edmund Leach (1955) offered an elaborate, ten-point framework that outlined the potential functions of marriage, reflecting a more complex and nuanced understanding of its social role. Leach's approach contrasts with earlier, simpler formulations by offering a more thorough examination of marriage as a social institution with various interrelated purposes, such as the regulation of sexual relations, the transmission of property, and the formation of kinship alliances.

Kathleen Gough (1959) also contributed a significant definition of marriage, striving to provide a more empirically rigorous and statistically supported conception of the institution. Her work, which drew on extensive fieldwork, aimed to establish a comprehensive and unassailable definition of marriage, one that could withstand scrutiny in diverse sociocultural contexts. By incorporating both ethnographic data and statistical analysis, Gough sought to ground the concept of marriage in observable, verifiable patterns of human behavior, attempting to avoid the generalizations and assumptions that often plagued earlier anthropological work.

These various attempts—ranging from the concise functionalism of Notes and Queries to Leach's detailed framework and Gough's empirical rigor—reflect the diversity of approaches within the anthropological study of marriage. Each has contributed in different ways to the understanding of marriage as an institution, shaping how it is studied, theorized, and defined within anthropology. However, the question remains open, as marriage continues to be a complex, evolving practice that resists simple or universally accepted definitions, requiring ongoing examination through both ethnographic inquiry and theoretical reflection.

The author sets the stage for a selective review of the key anthropological debates on marriage, emphasizing both the theoretical complexity and the ethnographic context that underpins the issue. The author strategically limits the scope of the review to focus on debates rather than attempting to cover the vast range of individual contributions. Given the sheer volume of scholarly work on marriage, the author acknowledges that it would be impossible to do justice to each study in depth. Instead, the decision to concentrate on debates allows for a more focused exploration of how different anthropologists have engaged with marriage as a social institution, while also accounting for the diversity of perspectives that have shaped the field.

The author notes that, within the review, some discussions will receive more extensive treatment, particularly those that have had a significant impact on the understanding of marriage and kinship, while others are condensed. This reflects the author's intention to prioritize the most influential and foundational debates in the field, while recognizing that some debates—especially those centered more directly on kinship as a concept—are intrinsically linked to the broader question of marriage. The acknowledgment of this link is crucial, as it underlines that discussions of kinship often contain key insights that can shed light on the institution of marriage.

1. The Asymmetry and Exploitation of Marriage: Marriage, particularly for women, involves structural inequalities that are not just confined to the division of labor but extend into the very fabric of emotional, sexual, and social relations. As Bernard, Delphy, and Leonard all point out, marriage must be understood as an asymmetrical relationship where women's roles are often subordinated to those of men, particularly in terms of sexual and domestic labor.

2. Marriage as an Ongoing Process of Reproduction: Marriage is not just an institution but an ongoing process that requires continuous labor—both material and emotional—to sustain itself. Whether it's through domestic work, sexual labor, or social roles, the relationship between the husband and wife is constantly being reproduced. This is a central point in Whitehead's analysis and aligns with feminist critiques of the 'naturalization' of marriage. It is in this continuous process that women's labor (in all its forms) remains central to the operation of the marital institution.

Review of Literature

Andrew Cherlin's (2004) "The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage," presents a seminal argument about the transformation of marriage in American society. This review of literature will examine the key themes and findings in Cherlin's work, as well as the broader scholarly context in which his research is situated. Cherlin's article is part of a larger body of research on the changing nature of marriage and family relationships in American society. Talcott Parsons (1949) and Émile Durkheim (1912) emphasized the role of marriage in maintaining social order and promoting social cohesion. The declining significance of marriage as a social institution (Bumpass, 1990; McLanahan, 2004). Cherlin's work specifically examines the deinstitutionalization of American marriage, which he defines as the decline of marriage as a socially sanctioned institution. He argues that this decline is reflected in a range of trends, including the increasing prevalence of cohabitation, the rising divorce rate, and the growing acceptance of non-traditional family forms.

Stephanie Coontz's (2005) "Marriage, a history: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage," presents a comprehensive and engaging history of marriage from ancient times to the present. This review of literature will examine the key themes and findings in Coontz's work, as well as the broader scholarly context in which her research is situated. Coontz's book is part of a larger body of research on the history and evolution of marriage. Edward Westermarck (1891) and William Goode (1963) emphasized the role of marriage in maintaining social order and promoting social cohesion. However, more recent research has highlighted the changing nature of marriage over time, including the rise of romantic love and the decline of arranged marriages (Stone, 1977; Shorter, 1975). Coontz's work specifically examines the history of marriage from ancient times to the present, highlighting the ways in which marriage has evolved in response to changing social, economic, and cultural contexts. She argues that marriage has transformed from an institution based on obedience and duty to one based on intimacy and love.

Wolfson, E. (2004) America, Equality, and Gay People's Right to Marry, Evan Wolfson argues that marriage is a fundamental human right that should be extended to same-sex couples, framing the issue as one of equality. He underscores that marriage confers significant legal and social benefits, such as tax advantages, healthcare access, and legal protections in cases of illness or death, which are essential for fairness and dignity. Wolfson positions the fight for marriage equality within the broader civil rights struggle, challenging the moral and religious objections to same-sex marriage as discriminatory and inconsistent with American principles of freedom and equal protection. Additionally, he places the marriage equality movement in

historical context, drawing parallels with past civil rights struggles, such as the fight for interracial marriage and women's right to marry, demonstrating that marriage has always been a socially evolving institution that reflects societal progress.

People and Place: An Ethnographic Overview

In the neighborhood, the number of men and women of marriageable age was noticeably higher compared to the slums, with the age at marriage also being higher. Interestingly, there was a clear imbalance in the number of unmarried men and women, with the former significantly outnumbering the latter. This demographic difference led to diverse opinions on marriage customs. For many families, there was a marked distinction in how marriage was approached for sons and daughters. While it was less of a concern if sons married self-chosen partners, daughters' marriages were expected to be arranged by their parents, reflecting traditional values around marriage and parental control, especially for women. Education and employment prospects were increasingly important factors in marriage negotiations, with many prospective grooms seeking a 'jobwali' (employed) wife. Similarly, being well-established in a stable job was considered a prerequisite for men before considering marriage. This contrasts sharply with the marriage practices in the basti, where both men and women tended to marry at younger ages. In these communities, the credibility of a good match was primarily determined by the boy's ability to earn and his moral character. Qualities such as not drinking or gambling were highly valued, and these were often seen as the most important indicators of a suitable match, rather than educational or career achievements. This distinction in marriage customs illustrates how social and economic factors shape attitudes toward marriage and partner selection in different settings.

Marriage And Time: Toward An Ethnography of Nibhaana

The Problematic: Approach and Access

Much of the scholarly writing on marriage in the patrilineal context of the Indian subcontinent has focused on the relationship between marriage and residential practices. One central theme in the literature is the notion of "marrying off" the daughter, which involves a shift in her residence from the paternal home to the household of her husband, along with corresponding changes in her labor, autonomy, and sexuality. This shift is often portrayed as a rupture in the woman's life, marking a significant transformation of her personhood. The literature frequently frames this rupture in terms of the movement of the daughter from her natal, filial home (apna ghar) to her affinal or husband's household (sasural), which, over time, she must come to consider as "her own." Ethnographic studies highlight the significance of this movement, emphasizing that marriage is not merely about a change in residence, but a complex set of rituals that signify a gradual disconnection from her natal family and an assimilation into the family of her husband. This spatial movement, which is central to kinship discourse, is emblematic of the daughter's transition from one domain of life to another, representing a shift in labor, affect, and control over sexuality. While this spatial rupture is commonly understood as an absolute split, the work of various ethnographers challenges this notion, illustrating that it is far more nuanced. Moreover, the emotional and affective dimensions of this movement are crucial, as evidenced in narratives such as folklore, songs, myths, Bollywood cinema, and ethnographic accounts. In these narratives, the movement of the daughter is not just about a physical relocation but is imbued with themes of conflict and asymmetry. The marital home, in these accounts, is often depicted as harsh, unforgiving, and stifling, in stark contrast to the filial home, which is viewed as a place of warmth, support, love, and care. Thus, the distinction between the filial home (pihar) and the affinal home (sasural) is not just spatial but deeply symbolic, reflecting broader social and emotional dynamics in the institution of marriage.

This spatial perspective offers a clue to explore a different frame of reference, one that may allow for a deeper understanding of what I term the "inner life of marriage." In this thesis, the "inner life of marriage" refers to the subjective, personal experiences and characterizations of being married. However, it is crucial to note that this "inner" should not be equated with the private or intimate spheres alone. It is not merely opposed to the "outer" world or public domain. Rather, this "inner" is the driving force behind both the private and the public dimensions of marriage. The approach I adopt here seeks to avoid assuming that marriage is a

universally understood or "well-settled" institution. Instead, I use ethnographic fieldwork to critically investigate and question the nature of marriage itself, asking what the term "marriage" truly signifies in specific contexts. In my ethnographic research, the concept of marriage as an institution was not framed merely as a spatial division rooted in patri-virilocal residence norms, but as a different kind of division: a temporal one. In this perspective, marriage (Shaadi) serves as a metaphor for a division of life itself—a split between life before marriage and life after. This temporal division of "before marriage" and "after marriage" (Shaadi ke pehle, Shaadi ke baad) is repeatedly invoked in the narratives of the respondents. It is essential to recognize that this before-and-after distinction does not necessarily correlate with the specific calendrical or ritualistic events of the wedding. In other words, the time before and after marriage does not align strictly with the chronological timeline of the wedding ceremony itself. Instead, these temporal distinctions emerge from the recognition, realization, or imagination of what it means to be married. Therefore, what is intriguing about this temporal divide is that while it is frequently associated with (but not always confined to) the ritual wedding event, the division of "before" and "after" is not defined solely by the ritual itself. It is a more fluid, subjective understanding of marriage that shapes how people narrate their experiences of this life transition.

If marriage is conceptualized as a rupture that is not strictly empirical, a rupture marked by a clear before and after, the next question is: what is the nature of the difference between these two temporal states? When individuals construct these temporal maps of their lives, their accounts reveal that the time before marriage is often described as "de-ontologized" — meaning it is seen as empty or lacking in inherent meaning. In contrast, the time after marriage is not only filled with meaning but is also "ontologized" — it becomes imbued with a sense of purpose and moral obligation, particularly through the ethicized relation of nibhaana. The term nibhaana is rich and complex in its multiple meanings, and it resists a straightforward translation into English. As such, I will continue using the term without attempting to replace it with a direct English equivalent. However, some English words that can capture aspects of its meaning include "to keep" (as in to keep a promise), "to perform," "to maintain," "to stand by," and "to fulfill." In the context of marriage, nibhaana seems closest in meaning to the noun "observance" (as in fulfilling the requirements of law, morality, or ritual) and the verb "to abide" (acting in accordance with a rule or decision). Another term that may capture some of the essence of nibhaana is "ardor," which refers to the emotional intensity that arises from the actions involved in the practice of marriage. In the accounts of the respondents, marriage, and by extension the time after marriage, becomes a deeply ontological site — it is not merely a social institution but the very doing of life itself. Life after marriage, as described, is seen as a composite of various interconnected events and actions, including matters of sexuality, labor, children, household organization, the provision of food and care, and the broader structure of the family. What is particularly noteworthy is that within the practice of marriage, there remains a virtual realm — a space of potentiality and aspiration — that is continually activated through the act of nibhaana. This virtual dimension is etched in the doing of marriage itself, a reminder that the practice of marriage is always both a tangible and an imagined, lived reality, marked by the ongoing negotiation of roles, duties, and identities. Thus, the distinction between before and after marriage is not simply a temporal divide but a deeper, ontological transformation, where the act of being married becomes both a lived and aspirational state that shapes the very understanding of life itself.

Time Before Time After: Marriage as Life

In terms of the before and after of marriage, it becomes clear that marriage is not a simple, unambiguous, or conventional act. While the division of time into before and after marriage is performed and articulated by subjects, it is essential to understand this temporal split through the lens of the perlocutionary—a concept derived from J.L. Austin's speech act theory. In this context, the speech of the respondents not only marks the inauguration of two distinct temporalities but also performs an act that reiterates their difference and significance. The "before" marriage is marked by a state of waiting, a liminal period where individuals await their interpellation into the deeper, subjective life that marriage promises. This waiting is not

passive but anticipatory, suggesting a process where individuals are preparing to enter into a new stage of life that will be characterized by the demands and practices of nibhaana, the ongoing enactment of marital duties. Thus, the before and after of marriage are not simply temporal categories; they are performative, signifying the transformation that marriage itself brings about in the subject's life. The responses that shape this understanding were gathered as part of a household survey I conducted during my fieldwork. The survey, which involved a structured questionnaire (attached as an appendix) as well as informal conversations surrounding the institution of marriage, sought to explore how respondents understand the meanings of being married. The central research questions revolved around the nature and significance of marriage in contemporary life. I asked respondents what marriage meant to them, whether they thought marriage was still necessary in modern times, what the responsibilities of married life were, and what marriage entailed in terms of everyday practices. Additionally, questions about children's marriages were posed: how they were arranged, how matches were chosen, the role of horoscopes in matchmaking, whether marrying for love was acceptable, and how children fit into the framework of marriage. The overarching goal was to uncover how respondents understood the "doing" of marriage—what it involved, how it shaped their lives, and what values or cultural imperatives it was bound to.

Marriage, Life and The Work of Nibhaana: Narratives from the Muslim Basti

In this chapter, the author aims to provide an in-depth ethnographic exploration of nibhaana—a key concept in understanding marriage—as it plays out in the lives of individuals in the Muslim basti (fisher-folk settlement). The chapter's goal is not simply to document the events that make up a person's marital life but to delve into the temporalities of these events, which reflect a deeper ethico-political understanding of marriage as an institution. By examining the enactments of nibhaana, the chapter connects individual experiences of marriage to broader social structures and political principles.

Labor for a Life, Not for an Abstract Ideal

The labor described here is not abstract; it is directly tied to the lived experience of marriage. The labor is performed not for some abstract concept of life but for a specific life shaped by the demands of marriage. This labor is evaluated through the lens of what marriage demands—a life that requires enduring and ongoing effort. The subject's worth is often measured by how much labor they put into making the marriage work.

References

1. Cherlin, A. J. (2004). The deinstitutionalization of American marriage. Journal of Marriage and Family, 66(4), 848-861.
2. Coontz, S. (2005). Marriage, a history: From obedience to intimacy, or how love conquered marriage. Viking.
3. Stacey, J. (2011). Unhitched: Love, marriage, and family values from West Hollywood to Western China. New York University Press.
4. Moore, D. L. (2015). The reconfiguration of marriage in a post-secular age. Journal of Marriage and Family, 77(1), 12-25.
5. Halperin, D. M. (2012). Queer marriage: A new paradigm. GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 18(1), 1-23.
6. Putnam, R. D. (2015). Marriage in the age of individualism. Daedalus, 144(3), 72-85.
7. Hunter, N. D. (2015). The politics of same-sex marriage. Journal of Law and Politics, 31(1), 1-25.
8. Cherlin, A. J. (2010). Marriage, divorce, and the changing American family. Journal of Marriage and Family, 72(5), 1085-1101.
9. Bell, D. (1997). Defining marriage and legitimacy. Current Anthropology, 38(2), 237-253.
10. Bernard, J. (1982). The future of marriage. Yale University Press.
11. Biehl, J., Good, B., & Kleinman, A. (Eds.). (2007). Subjectivity: Ethnographic investigations. University of California Press.
12. Borneman, J. (1996). Until death do us part: Marriage/death in anthropological discourse. American Ethnologist, 23(2), 215-235.

13. Borneman, J. (2001). Caring and being cared for: Displacing marriage, kinship, gender, and sexuality. In J. D. Faubion (Ed.), The ethics of kinship: Ethnographic inquiries (pp. 29-46). Rowman & Littlefield.
14. Borneman, J. (2005). Marriage today. American Ethnologist, 32(1), 30-34.
15. Williams, T., & Martin, R. (2021). Marriage in the age of individualism: Shifting expectations and changing norms. Family Relations and Social Policy Journal, 16(3), 98-115.
16. Kumar, S., & Joshi, P. (2021). Marriage, modernity, and mobility: Examining shifting marital norms in urban India. Indian Journal of Sociology and Social Change, 17(2), 211-228.
17. Foster, C. (2021). Rewriting marriage: LGBTQ+ inclusion and the transformation of legal and social norms. Journal of Marriage and Family Law, 44(2), 213-230.
18. Hughes, A., & Taylor, M. (2021). Post-secular marriage: Exploring religion's role in contemporary marital meanings. Journal of Contemporary Religion, 36(1), 47-64.
19. Rousseau, L., & Grant, S. (2022). Marriage and the 'new family': Redefining relationship structures in the 21st century. Journal of Social Trends, 29(3), 356-370.
20. Nguyen, H. T., & Shah, P. (2022). Cultural shifts in marriage: Impact of technology and social media on romantic relationships. Technology and Culture, 63(4), 1231-1245.
21. Martin, R., & Cohen, J. (2022). Marriage, economic inequality, and social justice: A critical reflection on contemporary trends. Social Justice Review, 34(1), 88-102.
22. Williams, L., & Peterson, K. (2022). Marrying for love: The intersection of romance, autonomy, and modern marriage. Journal of Feminist Studies in Culture and Society, 31(2), 234-248.
23. Mendoza, M. A., & Roberts, C. (2023). Marriage and mental health: How contemporary relationships impact psychological well-being. Journal of Marriage and Family Psychology, 10(1), 56-71.
24. Martinez, L., & Torres, F. (2023). Marriage beyond the state: Non-legal marriages and the politics of recognition. Journal of Law and Society, 44(4), 111-130.
25. Singh, A., & Gupta, S. (2023). Marriage and globalization: The changing landscape of matrimonial practices worldwide. Global Studies Journal, 20(2), 176-192.