



# **RISHTA CULTURE**

## **AN ESSAY**

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*An ode to what we wanted  
as girls but could not want  
as women...*

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**IRTA USMAN**

The first sin is always the woman's, and the sin is always the act of wanting. (Eve also wanted something she wasn't supposed to, and look where that got us). It is, of course, worse when you are caught in the act (as Eve once was). The perfect crime is impossible in this scenario. Similarly, in the *rishta* system, a woman who wants is always caught and punished. Only she is not red-handed; but she will be soon, with her henna-covered hands. A red-handed victim.



You will always remember the moment you realize that a marriage is not something you do—a marriage is something that happens to you. (*Koi shaadi karta nahi hai, shaadi bas hojati hai*).

At some point in your late teens and early 20s (depending on when, according to family traditions or religious obligation, the panic settles into the bones of your over-prepared mother), someone will set an imaginary timer and place it on an imaginary mantel in an imaginary room, the tick-ticking of which will echo and reverberate through the imaginary walls.

Your induction into the system is involuntary, and there is no warm welcome. There will be very few questions. (The lucky ones will be asked if they already have someone in mind, the unlucky ones will have to say no). You will be placed (sometimes gently, always fearfully) into the capable hands of a *rishtay wali* auntie, a character that once felt as mythical as the jinns that were used to coax you into sleeping when you were a child.

She will arrive, all flesh and blood, ten poking fingers and ten hasty toes, and she will behold you. A judgment will be made based on whether or not you are 25, which is the very spoken unspoken 'best before' age of a woman.

You will be 22—three good years still left in you—a woman with a fighting chance. The hunt will begin.

The *rishta* process often involves the making and unmaking of dreams, and the competing of dreams against one another. You will learn to abandon any dreams of holding a hand that loves you.

Instead, your *Amma* will dream for you about homes that are made in your name and money that never has to be counted before it is spent (*Pyaar pe zinda reh ke zindagi nahi guzarti*). Your *Amma* will also have nightmares about the possible failure of her life's most significant mission (finding you a husband); but your *Amma* will also have pleasant dreams that she shares in the morning: *Aaj mere khwaab main tum dulhan thi. Tumne mujhse kaha tum boht khush ho.*

She will look so hopeful in that moment that you will believe her. You will say *InshAllah*. She will echo you with a smile.

You will learn, slowly but surely, that the *rishta* system is an economy that is fueled entirely by the fear of women like you and your mother, by the falling through of the very *InshAllah*'s that you had also said.

The ones who are 'left behind' (the ones who could not or would not be united in the bonds of holy matrimony) are spoken of like bad omens in hushed, anxious whispers. Mothers click their tongues and kiss their teeth at these women (*Har cheez apne waqt par achi lagti hai*) as they become the stuff of nightmares.

About *him* (the one who has not yet been named, in anticipation of whom your life has been rearranged), there will be much to say, and it will all somehow sound different and exactly the same:

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He must be \_\_\_\_\_

He must do \_\_\_\_\_

He must not \_\_\_\_\_

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You will wait for him—which will be easy, and you will wait for the version of yourself that will meet him—which will be hard. You will cut your hair and ask yourself, 'Is this the hair his wife will have?' You will buy a new shirt and wonder if that is something his wife would wear.

For a moment, and I believe it is in the moment between two ticks from the imaginary timer, you will shiver with the possibility of a beautiful new life. You will let the word wife roll off your tongue and taste it in your mouth; let it coat the corners of your lips. You will construct a daydream entirely from scratch (as there is no one to dream it with). One in which a love simmers slowly with a faceless *him*. It is a daydream in which you sit at beautifully lit tables in faraway restaurants and begin

stories with, 'Actually, our parents introduced us, and it was love at first sight!'

It will be a brief moment, but it will be enough to sustain you for much longer than you can imagine. It will encourage endurance, and endurance is the opposite of wanting for a woman.

You will see many photographs of men a decade older than you and your young hands will shake. People will assure you it is all in good fun. You will taste the back of your teeth a lot in those conversations. The tip of your tongue will be raw.

You will not say the word love for a long time (this will have nothing to do with the tip of your tongue being unusable). You and your friends will huddle over these photographs and gulp nervously before a plethora of encouraging opinions is shoved down your throat:

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'You have to kiss many frogs to meet your prince, you know.'

'I think marriage is bigger than being attracted to the person you marry, you know.'

'They all look the same past a certain age, you know.'

'You never want to marry the handsome ones anyway, they know they're handsome, and that's a problem for you, you know.'

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They will not say what they want to say, which is *I wanted something different for you since we were girls, but we are women now, and this is what we get.*

You will tire of it, the rejection of images and reading of *rishta* profiles, and imagine walking up to a random man on the street and asking for his hand in marriage, just so you can have someone to present to your mother, who was not so prepared after all.

Eventually and miraculously, someone you know will emerge victorious from the *rishta* system. A *baat* will be *pakki'd*, and you will marvel at the success rate of this insatiable machine. You will ask her, adorned and adored, the bride-to-be, 'How does it feel?'

'Like nothing,' she will say. You will look in her eyes, and you will see that she is scared. The two of you will look like two deer caught in the headlights of two mothers and their unrelenting fear. You will laugh, and she will say 'Ab kya he fark parra hai?'

She will slide a ring onto a strange man's hand, and the room will erupt with shouts of joy.

People will embrace and congratulate each other, and the bride will smile politely and stare straight ahead. You will wonder if her ring fits right, if any of it will ever fit right.

You will come home that day a bit shaken. Still, you will allow yourself to hope. *Amma* will say '*Ham toh issko dhakka dene ke chakkar main hain, bas dua karein*' at the dinner table when the fast-approaching end of your degree is discussed at a family dinner, and it will feel like an actual shove.

The *dhakka* will be felt throughout your body. You will love her anyway, and you will hope for a little less again.

You will remind yourself that you are not the first woman to go through this, and you will certainly never be the last.

*Rishta* culture is not an inherent evil; it is often a community experience for women as they gather together to achieve a collective goal. You are everyone's daughter in that time period—you belong to many mothers as you wait to belong to a husband. There is laughter and love in many of those conversations, prayers, and genuine hope.

One likes to imagine that it is perhaps tradition enduring in the face of modernity, as the 'arranged marriage' becomes more and more frowned upon in younger circles. Nevertheless, it is more often than not an experience so lonely and alienating for the young women going through it, that it never leaves them.



In Pakistani society, one that is deeply religious and one where marriage is tied to the idea of the completion of one's faith, it requires an incredibly delicate dance between hope and *naseeb*; between what we want and what is wanted (or written) for us.

This essay is an ode to that loneliness, to what we wanted as girls but could not want as women.