

How the injuries of modern love are redefining India's ideas of traditional marriage

Heartbreak may make an individual decide to choose a more formal process of spouse-selection, aided by parents or a matchmaker.



An artisan paints hearts made of polystyrene at a road side workshop ahead of Valentine's Day, in Kolkata. | Rupak De Chowdhuri/Reuters

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Parul Bhandari

Valentine's Day is marked by love, kindness, compassion, and romance. It is also seen as a marker of modernity by a sizeable section of India's young people. To celebrate this day, they often take their cue from images in films and sitcoms: they dine at restaurants, exchange gifts, or take short getaways. Such a narrative of celebration of love tends to gloss over another, less talked about aspect of love – its dark side.

Romantic experiences are not all glorious and satisfactory. They tend to hurt as well, during the relationship at times or upon a break-up. In other words, romantic relationships can lead to feelings of pain, hurt, and heartbreak, as well as experiences of betrayal, guilt, or shame. These, I refer to as injuries of love, for these experiences, caused when in love – or because of love – can injure or wound an individual's sense of self. They can also augment a feeling of vulnerability, related either to finding that perfect love or holding on to "true" love.

Only very recently, film director Karan Johar tapped into these vulnerabilities by presenting himself as the messiah of those injured or untouched by love, in his Netflix reality show, *What the Love?*

These injuries of love are often simplistically interpreted as individualistic feelings and emotions. They are considered to be unconnected to larger matters of matchmaking and marriage, as they are brushed away as “phases” of *ishq*, *pyaar*, *mohabbat*, or youth. Yet, as I noted in [my research and book](#) *Matchmaking in Middle Class India: Beyond Arranged and Love Marriage*, these experiences can alter the processes of matchmaking, and crucially can challenge stereotypes about “arranged” and “love” marriages.

Delayed marriage

In some ways, the extent of these injuries seems to be felt more nowadays than before because there is a greater chance or time for these experiences, caused by the urban middle class’ decision to push their age of marriage to late 20s and early 30s. This trend is noted in South East Asian societies as well. Some countries are worried that these trends of late-marriage or non-marriage might lead to slow population growth. As a result, these governments – Singapore and Japan, for example – are [actively intervening](#) to promote marriage by [organising speed-dating events](#) and making laws conducive to raising families, such as longer maternity and paternity leave periods).

Indian society has not yet got to this stage, but it is amply evident that by pushing ahead the age of marriage, there is now a phase of what scholars have called “elongated singlehood”. This implies non-marriage, and is not clear of romances all together. In fact, this phase is used to experiment with diverse romantic encounters, from one-night stands to short-term romances to “serious” relationships.

Some of these relationships go as planned and some don’t, leaving at least one individual in the couple hurt and in pain.



Break-ups may be leading more people towards the idea of arranged marriages and relationships within their caste, regional or linguistic identity. Credit: Ashish Kushwaha

Ways of healing

Often, break-ups lead to hollow and biting feelings of sorrow, regret, and hurt, causing a severe blow to self-esteem. With the added pressure of “saving face” or simply because one’s friends or family do not have enough time to engage with their heartbreak, some individuals indulge in self-harm to ease the pain. My research shockingly revealed a high level of such activities, ranging from recourse to alcohol, drugs, rage, sex (paid sex at times), and also attempts at suicide.

Some think it better to confide in their therapists. The popularity of self-help techniques – either with a professional, which is at an all-time high, or through books or group exercises – has led recent scholarship to argue that one of the defining characteristics of the contemporary, neoliberal middle class is that it has shifted focus from the development of the “nation” to development of “self”.

Adopting such an expansive and sociological understanding of injuries of love also enables a critical analysis of the categories of “arranged” and “love” marriage. For example, a debilitating experience of a romantic relationship can leave an individual hurt, fatigued or uninterested in being involved in another romantic relationship. As a result, they might decide to choose a more formal process of spouse-selection, where a suitable spouse is suggested to them either through parents or matchmakers.

Altered expectations

Furthermore, the injuries of love might also compel an individual to change their criteria of an ideal spouse. It is possible that for their initial romantic relationships, the urban middle class does not care about their prospective boyfriend or girlfriend’s caste status or linguistic and regional identity, and willingly transgresses these boundaries to find love based on connection and compatibility.

After experiencing hurt and pain in love, however, they might actively choose to marry someone from within their caste, linguistic or regional group, as they believe that these commonalities can reduce chances of conflict and discord.

Therefore, injuries of love are not simply individual emotions that can only be studied by psychologists. Rather, these have emerged as a serious sociological phenomenon that warrants greater research. Crucially, it sparks the important question of how exactly love informs modernity. Is the narrative of love and being modern only about transgressions of caste, region, community, or could it lead to conformities?

Parul Bhandari is Associate Professor, Sociology, O.P, Jindal Global University. This article is based on her book “Matchmaking in Middle Class India: Beyond Arranged and Love Marriage.”