

## Child Marriage As A Major Concern in Pashto Poetry

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### Abstract

Child marriage is a major concern we read in Pashto poetry. They believe fewer financial resources left people in desperate need to survive. It means poverty has caused both girls and boys to pay the price. Poor parents give away their girls to wealthier men regardless their (men's) background, and that child marriage is one of the tragedies that got the attention of Pashto language poets. Prior to read poems about child marriage, explanation is needed to the age which is considered as child. According to Afghanistan Civil Law a legal age for a female is 16 and 18 for male. It means a girl can marry at the age of sixteen and a boy at eighteen. UNFPA reported that child marriages are illegal because both partners did not cross the age they were prescribed by the law. Afghanistan's minimum age of marriage 16 or 18 is well below the internationally recommended standard of 18. Child marriages are usually aimed at strengthening ties with rival families and tribes as part of deals or to settle blood feuds and disputes. At the meantime, a financially poor families often end up selling daughters for large dowries that is offered by wealthy mean who by age or much older.

**Keywords:** *Child marriage, poverty, major concern, discourse analysis, Pashto poetry.*

### Introduction

Mostly men make the decisions to arrange marriage for male and female member of the family. Even if the female member of the family, for instance: wives, mothers, sisters, and the girls themselves can be aware of the process but they do not have that much influence in finalizing the decision. Every year, over one-tenth of Afghan adolescent females give birth because of

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early marriage. At the meantime, there is lack of access to reproductive health information and treatments. Girls and teenagers are significantly more likely than their older sisters to die from pregnancy-related causes. In Afghanistan, the pregnancy-related mortality ratio for women aged 15 to 19 is projected to be 531 deaths per 100,000 live births, compared to 257 deaths per 100,000 live births for young women aged 20 to 24 years. Furthermore, one-quarter of women have obstetric fistula, which can lead to miscarriage (UNFPA, 2022)

In Islamic teachings a father can decide for minor about his/her marriage but when these children reach their adulthood they can either agree or boycott the decision. But Pashtun society is different as no child can ever oppose his/her parents' decision that is made on behalf minor because these children would be considered cursed ones. It is patriarchal society where Islamic teachings are mixed with traditionality which makes it very hard to resolve. This article is more like cultural studies or discourse analysis of Pashtun society as anthropological linguist studies. Beginning to understand what poets wrote about we try to read poems written in Pashto language. The following part of this article are poems regarding child marriage. We read what one of the poets think about it.

Mostly daughters will be the victim  
Parents have no mercy on their children  
Why you do not treat your children nicely  
Why you do not treat your loved ones nicely  
اکثر دا ظلم په لوریانو کيږي  
د مور پلار زړه په بچو نه خوږیږي  
ولي بچو ته تاسو ښه نه گورئ  
د زړه ټوټو ته تاسو ښه نه گورئ  
Aksar da zulum pa loryano kigi  
Da mor aw plar zra pa bachu na khogigi  
Wali bachu ta taso kha na gorai  
Da zra toto ta taso kha na gorai

Here we read that 'daughters will be the victim.' In real scenario boys are the same victim because of these kinds of marriages take place. Boys are also not asked by their parents. The poem further blames parents for not treating the children according to Islamic ethics. In the following poem we read the speaker of the poem compared these marriages with prisons and

asking for clarification to know why girls should be pushed into that much responsible life. The poems also report about the consequences: Why you imprisoned children in their young age – Why there all life is in turmoil ... They set fire on themselves – They set fire their children, family, and community.'

'Two families turn enemy of each other' because of child marriage two families became enemy with each other and this is not rare. Such cases are common in Pashtun society where two families are determined to shot down each other and these all because of the child marriage goes wrong: 'Two families turn enemy of each other – Her life partner becomes a huge burden on her ... Why this much cruelty is ongoing – Why this should happen to us' (Ikhlas, 2021, pp. 78 - 79).

Because of the force marriage the speaker of the poem found that life in force marriage is unending tragedy: 'You load sorrows on her – You tie their marriage relation when they are children... These marriages are always failure – Two families always get separated'. These marriages are always failure. It could cause violence in the family and damage children growth. Children learn violence to be employed because it is one of the option available. When there is no communication there is violence employed. Children believe in violence and aggression and that we see a lot of violence in the region where physical confrontation is most likely to happen in every deal. As the poem develops, we read children need to grow and when the right time comes, they will be grown up and educated enough to choose their partner by their choice which is Islamic and there is nothing illegal about it. If marriage takes place by consent the family will be happy and the society will be healthier one. Let us read the rest of the poem.

Because it is a sign of ignorance

It is not right but sign of stupidity

They (children) still play around

They still laugh at each other

But you arrange their marriage and have some sweet

You set their life on fire and flames

Marriage decided by the parents in childhood has consequences. According to Islamic Fiqh both children have the right to either agree with the marriage or break it as soon they are adult. But in Pashtun society a child is unlikely disagree with the marriage because his/her parents had promised each other unbroken bounding by marring their children to each other. Also, the

children who will disagree with their marriage will be considered as ugly children which is a misunderstanding of Islamic teachings. The Holy Quran clearly explains. There is no obedience of parents in something that is unislamic (Ikhlas, 2021). We read more about the child marriage and its negative impact in the poems: ‘As time passes they get older – They realized each other truly well ... The boy says he doesn’t want the girl – The girl also says she will kill herself. The speakers claims that girls now know their rights and can question the patriarchal decisions and structures. The problem in child marriage is there is no consent of both parties and secondly there is no understanding between them. And that the marriage does not work and fail and turn to war between two families and tribes: ‘The girl too is asking her rights and choice – She is looking life with someone else ... They do not share any feelings and concerns – They have huge gap understanding each other’s thoughts’. We read the aftermath of child marriage in following piece of poem by Asma Ikhlas. Asma wrote this long poem explaining the consequences by reporting the problems in child marriage. As Pashtun women poet, Asma Ikhlas opposes child marriage and call for relooking into this tragedy which is one of the biggest concerns of Pashtun poets. A piece of the poem can be read as following: By force you cannot be in a relationship – The girl’s brother is angry with her sister ... They are heading toward judges and courts – The earth gets too small; they are exploring the sky’. The Earth shorten for them and they are exploring the sky is word by word translation means both families are looking for solution but this tragedy has no solution instead stop child marriage at first step. Very clearly Asma calls on people for stopping child marriage and let the children to grow up and decide for themselves later.

Do not do these child marriages

Do not make trouble and do not repeat the same story

When they get adult – their marriage shall be done

Child marriage is useless

د وړوکوالي دا رشتي مه کوئ

نور دا لانجي او دا قيصي مه کوئ

چې شي بالغ بيا يې رسته پکار ده

د وړوکوالي منخته بیکار ده

Da warokwali da reshti ma kawai

Noor da lanji as da qisi ma kawi

Chi shi balegh bia yi reshta pakara dah

Da warokwali manakhta bekar dah

(Ikhlas, 2021, p. 81)

Our Dear Prophet has told us and Islam also allows its followers to make their decision truly wisely about their life partner. Marriage is serious decision which will change the life forever and it should not be held in a hurry and that according to Islam life partner must be carefully decided. In Pashtun society it is more serious because it connects two families and two tribes and there is no divorce even when marriage does not work. We read further on child marriage explored by poets and this is their major concern for several reasons but one of the chief reasons is that marriage and family is the foundation of a society and if the foundation is ill the society will not be prosperous. Along with child marriage there is force marriage that take place. Force marriage is a marriage which is decided by parents without the consent of their sons and daughters. Again, according to Islam an adult man and woman have the rights to choose their husband or wife. For more information on force marriage please watch short videos by Mufti Menk. The link is provided in the Work Cited section. Anyhow, again we read a speaker speaks about her sister younger to her and she wrote that her younger sister was not happy there: ‘Her life was in hell she was not in her house – My sister was young. she was not in her house... She was simple. She was not in her house – It is Pashtun country; her mouth was shut, My Dear! (Ikhlas, 2021, p. 160).

In above poem we read the girl was child and she did not complete her age of marriage. In Afghanistan, a girl can marry as soon she completes sixteen years in good health. As eighteen years is legal age in Pakistan. Anyhow, in the following piece of pome we read how small the girl was: ‘She is young. She wants bracelets, looking terrified – She is unaware of her father’s poverty’. Earlier we read that poverty caused much of the tragedies we read in women’s poetry. As the poem develops it turns out to be adding another topic behind the child marriage which is poverty. In the following piece of poem we read that money is power and possessing this power can be helpful buying joys in a world where you must pay for everything.

Wondering, how much joy I can buy having two pennies with me

My mother is sick if I can have her some medicines

Neither I could have bracelets not I became happy

Neither I met my friends nor I could compete with them

په دوه پیسو به کورته زه څه خوشحالیانې راوړم

مور مي ناجوره ده هغي له دوايانې راوړم  
نه مي بنگري په لاسو سور شو نه خوشحاله شومه  
نه مي همزولي چرته وليدي نه سياله شومه  
Pa dua paiso ba koor ta za za khushaliani rawram  
Moor mi najoora dah ghaghi la dawayani rawram  
Na ni bangri pa laso sor sho na khoshala shooma  
Na mi hamzoli chirta walidi na siala shooma. (Ikhlas, 2021, p. 43)

Rivalry exists in Pashtun society. People are collective and they do not want to be behind their cousins, friends and those who they do not like. Here in this poem we read ‘nor I could compete with them’. Competition and rivalry are one of life’s motivation in the society. In the poem by Asma Ikhlas points out poverty as women’s concern. It is explained that how impossible it is to live a life with having less. ‘Two pennies’ is a symbolic language of expression poverty in today materialistic world as inflation is high during the Covid 19 pandemic in 2021 and so on. On the other hand, the poem reports about not having male guardian present and that a female speaker of poem is wondering if she can buy medicine for her mother while she is not having ‘bracelets’. And having no enough financial support or wealth depresses the speaker of the poem.

After long decades of wars many families lost their male guardians and that women must look for means to survive. Poverty adds to the unending tragedy of Pashtun women. This piece of poem is an image of a scene of many scenes. Along with Ikhlas, Amil, another Pashtun poet brings another image of their society. In the following poem it is now male speaker who complains about poverty. We read in Pashto language poetry that poverty in Pashtun society is one of the biggest cause behind child marriage.

My labor ate me. I did not eat any meal  
The world ate me. I did not eat anything from the world  
Last night, I was wishing my death – death did not show up  
Last night, I had so much pain – I did not swallow this pill

مزدوری وخورم خو ما لا مری ونه خوره  
زه نری وخورم ما دا نری ونه خوره  
بيگا مي مرگ ته تمنا وه مرگ مه نه رادرومي

بيگاه مي درد ډير و، ما هغه گولي ونه خوره

Mazdorai wakhoram khu ma la marai wana khora

Za narai wakhoram ma da narai wa nak hora

Bega mi marg ta tamana wa marg ma na da radromi

Begah mi dard deer wo, ma ghagh golai wa nak hora. (Aamil 27)

Amil further writes in her other poem about how feeling of inferiority has been hunting her. In the following piece of poem, it is explained that she has no shoes to wear for the school and has only one notebook. At the contrary, her cousins are doing well. They have shoes and have enough school essentials because their father is wealthy and at the meantime careless about his nieces and nephews. In the poem we read the speaker of the poem believe the wealthier shall assist those in need as the speaker reports ‘my uncle is wealthy but has no mercy upon them: ‘I go to school but I do not have shoes on my feet – There is no Pashtu in people of this area ... My uncle is wealthy his children have no problem – My uncle is wealthy but has no mercy for us’ (Aamil 68).

Discussed earlier that how families compete in Pashtun community. it must be true in entire South Asia but here we read it very clearly happening in Pashtun society where a parent addresses her children declaring their financial crises and they more worrying point is children will stay way behind from those who can be supported by their families financially. We read poets paid enormous attention to poverty making it as their major concern behind child marriage. Similar thoughts are covered by other poets and here we read a poem by Amil quoted from her book Broken Wrist.

Our life is poor – having no penny for a tiny piece of food

Now there is no labour in the city

Children! My goodness – you will never compete the kids of wealthy

My child! I do not have any penny in your father’s pocket

غربت كي ژوند دی، د یوې گولي روپی نشته

خونده د ښار اوس بیخي د مزدوری نشته

بچي! قربان شمه د خان د بچوسپال لانه سي

بچیه! پلار سره دي جیب کی اشرپی نشته

Ghurbat ki zond day, da yawi golai ropai nashta

Khonda da khar was bekhi da mazdorai nashta

Bachi! Qurban shama da khan da bachu sial la na si

Bachia! Plar sara di jeeb ki ashrapai nashta

More imagery of poverty is expositied in the following lines as we read that it is now extreme poverty because they are wearing used cloths which means they cannot afford new cloths. 'Akh! It is unbearable poverty – They gave me used cloths.' Further we read that it has been difficult years for the mother who lost her husband for past six years. Losing a male member of the family has savior consequences for the family. We read a big chapter of financial and psychological struggles written by Ulfat Begum who lost his father in early age and had no male member to take responsibility for the family. Here we read a similar story.

It is my sixth year; my husband is dead. Wakhki!

Dear daughter! I repair shoes and make Chappal in this city

!زما شپيرم کال دی، خاوند مي مي دی اوبنکي

بچی بوتونه گندم دي بنار کي څپلي جوړوم

Zama shpagam kaal day, khawand mi mar day wakhki

Bachai botona gandum di khar ki saplai jorawam (Aamil 187)

Zeb Yusufzai is a living Pashtun woman poet who wrote much of her poetry covering all the major issues a Pashtun community facing. In her beliefs and experiences poverty cause a big damage to the society. Recently, inflation in Pakistan caused huge pain for ordinary people especially for Pashtuns who do not own much of the country wealth and businesses. Because of the poverty Pashtun women must work who were considered as the queen of the family. In one of Zeb poems we read: 'Whom I should blame for my poverty – Sisters and mothers' scarf is torn apart'. As the poem develops we read in details that there are many bills pending to be paid off: 'I shall complain about gas and electricity – Flour has been expensive and I should weep on my poverty ... Should I complain about the old scarf of my Malalai – Or should I complain about Zeb Yousufzai' misery'.

زه مسله وايه د گيس او د بجلي وژاړم

اوره گران شوی که د خپل کورد نیستی وژاړم

که زور سالوپه سرد خپلي ملالی وژاړم

سیری گریوان که زه د زیب یوسفزی وژاړم

Za masala wia da gase aw da bejlai wazaram

Wra gran shawi ka da khpal koor da nistai wazaram



Ka zoor salo pa sar da khpali malalai wazaram

Seri griwan ka za da zeb Yusufzai wazaram. (Yusufzai, 2022, p. 102)

In this article we are reading poems written in Pashto language by Pashto speaking poets who are residing in South Asia. And South Asia is the region with the highest number of child brides. According to Relief Web Report South Asia is home to 45% of all child brides worldwide (reliefweb, 2023). UNICEF report Child Marriage in Afghanistan Changing the narrative published in July 2018 defines child marriages as following:

‘A formal marriage or an informed union before the age of 18. According to Article 70 of the Afghan civil law, child marriage for girls is considered before the age of 16 since the legal marriageable age is 16 for girls and 18 for boys. Marriage under the age of consent for children is a form of forced marriage. (Afghanistan, 2018)

The report explains that a child marriage is not a marriage as it is not happening at the right age of both parties who not only cross the prescribed age but also did not express their consent for marriage and taking a new big step in their life. The Reports adds: ‘child marriage cannot be considered as “marriage” but rather an act of injustice and violence against children (Afghanistan, 2018)’

According to report: In Afghanistan, the prevalence of child marriage is so high that at least one in three young girls will get married before turning 18. It is not, however, a thoroughly studied phenomenon in this setting and there are still unanswered questions about its prevalence, usage, and causes. On the other side of the border where there is also Pashto speaking population reside, there is shocking number of minor marriages taking place. 1 in 6 marriages is a marriage of minor female and female. UNICEF reported that 9.4 million marriages are registered as child marriages in Pakistan (UNICEF PAKISTAN, 2018).

According to UN Women child marriage denies girls their rights to a safe and healthy childhood, a quality education that can lead to respectable economic opportunities, and social and political empowerment. Pakistan has the sixth-highest rate of girls being married before turning 18 worldwide. Child marriage is common because of a number of circumstances, including as deeply rooted customs and rituals, poverty, a lack of education or information and a lack of security.

Health and nutrition, fertility and population growth, infant mortality, educational achievement, labor force participation, women's agency and gender-based violence are

typically linked to the effects of child marriage. Child marriage is usually opposed from the perspectives of human rights and health but it is frequently overlooked that child marriage has a detrimental effect on a country's economic development. 2017 World Bank research predicted that by 2030 child marriage would cost emerging nations trillions of dollars. Given Pakistan's high child marriage rate, it is critical to comprehend how child marriage affects the economy in these areas (UN WOMEN Asia and the Pacific, 2020)

To prevent further engagement in child marriage in all over Afghanistan the leadership of the Islamic Emirate instructs all officials, religious scholars, and tribal elders to work hard to achieve the following rights for women:

1- The consent of an adult woman is necessary for marriage. No one can force an adult woman (adult women refers to a woman who is 17 years old) into marriage by pressure or compulsion;

2- A woman is not a piece of property but a genuine human being. No one can trade her for peace in a deal between two families.

In some areas, a girl is exchanged to assuage a blood feud. It means if a male member of the family kills another man through community leaders and their mediation the killer offers a girl from his family to the family of victim. And the family of victim may agree to this deal. The intention of this kind of deal that a girl is offered to the family of victim is to replace enmity with friendship between these two families but it can be read that it causes family violence as the girls given to the family of victim is never welcomed and considered as belittle and dehumanized.

3- After the death of her husband and passing of her e'dat a widow cannot be remarried to her brother-in-law or anyone else. A widow has the right to marriage and to determine her own destiny.

4- Receiving a dowry is a widow's Sharia right;

5- Women have a fixed inheritance right when it comes to the property of their husbands, children, father, and other relatives. No one can deprive them of this right based on either fardiyat [primary heirs] or asabiyat [residual heirs]

6- Those with multiple wives are obliged to give their wives their rights according to the rules of Sharia and to observe fairness among them. (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2023)

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