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Book Review
Mansi Choksi, The Newlyweds
Rearranging Marriage in Modern India
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India is often described as a country of contradictions, an expression that highlights the diversity of its landscape and its people, which creates in turn a myriad of lived realities. On a closer look, however, many instances of unity and consensus can be observed, with the centrality of religion and family especially salient. Marriage is a common denominator of the two in a country in which most marriages continue to be arranged by parents. Mansi Choksi writes that approval of premarital dating is low and that marriages based on love are still the exception, especially in rural areas. Consequentially, relationships which cross religions or castes remain rare and can even be perceived as a threat to the social fabric: "Most of us think like our parents and conduct our lives based on the fear of disappointing them. In many ways, marriage is the only intended outcome of growing up" (p. 21).

However, Choksi has also noted a changing dynamic in this regard, which she depicts in her debut book, *The Newlyweds*. Here she portrays three young couples who defied societal norms and family expectations in relation to marriage.

A journalist by profession, Choksi followed the lives of the book's protagonists for several years. She is thus able to portray their experiences in great detail and capture their development through many stages. Born in Mumbai herself, she deliberately chose couples from rural backgrounds. Two thirds of India's population live in a rural environment, and she wanted to explore the lives of average Indians, not the progressive avantgarde in the cities. The people she portrays had internalized the conventions of Indian society

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yet were willing to challenge them to pursue their relationships. In violating various norms – love within a single religious denomination or a single caste, marriage between a man and a woman – they all lost a part of their identity, what it means to be Indian, Choksi writes.

The first story portrays the relationship of Neetu, a Hindu female, and Dawinder, a Sikh male. Additionally, Neetu is from a higher caste than Dawinder. While his family are farmers, hers run a shop and are respected in the community. Yet, their biggest violation is in not being from the same *gotra*, the equivalent of lineage in Hindu culture. Their religious devotion is repeatedly highlighted: for example, Neetu secretly gave up eating meat to convince Lord Shiva of her love for Dawinder. Her family were not to be convinced: the couple had to escape their village when they were exposed. They found refuge in Delhi, in a shelter for so-called runaway couples. Although their hosts supported their engagement, the relationship soured when the couple's financial means ran low, and Neetu and Dawinder got married on their own to start a family. When news of their marriage reached their home village, Neetu's family assaulted Dawinder's mother. The couple eventually convinced the police to arrest the assailants, but their action only further damaged Dawinder's family's reputation: not only had the Sikhs taken a girl from the village, but they had also had a reputable family jailed, so ran the common opinion. Together with his parents, Neetu and Dawinder moved to live with one of his relatives, but there Neetu was continually harassed. Having achieved their goal of creating a family together, they began to question whether their love had been worth the trouble. Neetu missed her family, and Dawinder came to believe his love marriage had destroyed the lives of his loved ones.

The second story follows the lives of Monika, a Hindu female, and Arif, a Muslim male, an interfaith couple from Maharashtra. When Monika first rejected Arif, on account of their religious differences, Arif thought, "History is witness that Hindus and Muslims cannot be together" (p. 39). However, they eventually did start to date secretly. While still a teenager, Monika became pregnant. Unable to find a doctor willing to perform an abortion – the issue was social stigma, not legal constraints – Monika was left with two options, as she explained to Arif: "Either I commit suicide, or I go away with you. Can you arrange everything? Can we get married tomorrow?" (p. 48). In the living room of a Muslim cleric, Monika converted to Islam and married Arif. Without informing anyone, they left their homes and disappeared. Their decision to leave proved justified: their hometown's police station was sur-

rounded by an angry mob the day Monika's family learned about her *nikah*, which was contested in court. The jury ruled in their favor, but Monika was now living with a family she did not know, and Arif had started training in faraway Mumbai. Having given birth to their daughter on her own, Monika started longing for her family again. She and Arif did eventually reunite, but she still could not see him frequently and grew ever more distant from his parents, heightening her loneliness. Monika stayed committed to her marriage, but while their story ends without a twist, it does contain a widening gap between them.

The third and final story depicts a queer couple in Telangana. After Reshma escaped a violent arranged marriage, she started a relationship with her female cousin, Preethi. Her family, which planned her marriage, did not approve, leaving the couple with no choice but to elope. They found refuge in Maharashtra, but they were eventually discovered by Preethi's family after she, in a moment of weakness, called home. After their story caught the attention of the media, the couple received help from a group of social scientists in Mumbai, where they were able to reunite. Broader society remained skeptical, however, about homosexual couples, leaving them wondering whether they needed to "pretend to be sisters their whole lives" (p. 62). Coming from rural backgrounds, neither woman had ever thought her values might become so progressive, with their story occurring at the same time as the repeal of Section 377, part of the colonial-era Penal Code that criminalized homosexuality.[1] In 2023, however, the Supreme Court rejected the legalization of same-sex marriage.[2] Choksi comments, "We confused homophobia with Indianness, even though our mythology brimmed with references to homosexuality" (p. 63). Eventually, the couple had to leave Mumbai, and they moved in with Reshma's family, who regularly demeaned Preethi. Unable to endure this treatment, Preethi found her affection for Reshma drained, and she started to long for a heterosexual relationship. Preethi left Reshma to return to her family and was married to a cross-cousin.

I find this book insightful, not least in examining the relationship between media and religion when it depicts how this association shapes discussions about marriage. As she narrates these stories, Choksi describes, for example, the creation of a group that houses runaway couples, gives context for the

1 Ghosh 2018.

2 Rajagopal 2023.

ongoing practice of honor killings and explains how these cases are treated by the media. Media reports on such marriages have appeared regularly since the publication of this work. When a similar case erupted in Haryana, in 2025 – the house of the husband's family was vandalized – some of the coverage tied the elopement to family honor, suggesting the violent consequences were justified, despite the couple's legal rights.[3] Neetu's uncle argued similarly: "We have lost our daughter, our honor, our everything" (p. 26). When India's Supreme Court ruled that interference in consensual marriages was illegal, *khap panchayats*, traditional village councils in northern India protested. Media outlets continue to report on Haryana's "war with love marriages".[4]

Choksi also provides context for emerging issues, such as the legal background to marriages in India. While Hindu and Muslim marriages are governed by separate laws, the Special Marriage Act of 1954 was created to allow interfaith couples to marry, the law also allows public objections to the marriage to be raised within a month which can turn into societal disputes and even conspiracy theories. The most prominent alleged plot is termed *love jihad*, the theory that Muslim men are seducing Hindu women in order to convert them to Islam. Several Indian states have introduced prohibitions on certain religious conversions, specifically targeting these interfaith couples. In 2025, Maharashtra started discussing the introduction of such a bill,[5] and in Uttar Pradesh the first acquittal of an accused Muslim occurred in the same year.[6]

The Newlyweds combines journalistic and narrative styles in its portrayal of young Indian couples' troubled relationships, which underscore the book's central theme: the reshaping of marriage in India and the hurdles it must clear. While religion continues to play an important role in marriage, younger generations are exploring new possibilities. However, despite the abundance of love stories in Indian media, most engagements continue to follow an arrangement. Choksi highlights this tension by portraying the challenges between romantic ideals and lived realities. Her book is thus an insightful read for people both engaged with and interested in the concerns of Indian youth.

3 Mukesh 2025.
4 Kissu 2024.
5 Gangan 2025.
6 Tiwari 2025.

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