

International Marriages Are Risky.  
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One of the most important decisions in our lives is the choice of marriage partner. This trumps almost any other relationship we might have---because when good, it outlasts even our relationship with our children.

Marriage choices until our own time were the prerogative of parents (mostly fathers) or, in the still benighted parts of the world, clans and tribes. The children were rarely consulted because it was considered much more important than their whims or hormones. Love was something that one hoped (if lucky) would come gradually.

The modern standard is that young people should date a wide circle of friends from a similar culture and winnow the choice to the best. This is the ideal. The reality is that half the populations make choices that do not, and cannot survive. Sexual passion does not last, and if not followed by genuine respect and affection, the marriage is in danger of falling apart.

Our world's globalization has presented another challenge to marriage: partners from totally different cultures (or religions). Cross-cultural marriages worked pretty well in 19th century Britain, where impoverished nobility married American heiresses; both got what they wanted (think of Jenny Churchill, Winston's American mother).

Today's international marriages are different. Marriages of American women with foreign husbands can work if the couple remains in the bride's country, and their chances are even better if the husband comes from an equally modern country. They can also work when the husband is from the Middle East or India if the couple remains in the US. However, when the wife finds herself in her mate's culture, she may discover two things: that his very personality reverts to his native values and that she has none of the supports or rights expected by an American woman. This is nightmare stuff.

I know of four examples of women, all of them educated, who were caught in Middle Eastern marriages that went bad. One was mine, married into an aristocratic Iranian whose family that I really liked. We had a 15-year marriage, sometimes in Iran, but most of it living in the US. When he reached his late 30s, he increasingly missed his status in Iran vs. his status in egalitarian US as a professor. His reversion to his native values ended our marriage.

A generation before my marriage was that of another UCLA student, Marian Alireza, who married a Saudi diplomat. She went with him to Saudi Arabia, good-humoredly put up with Saudi misogyny that forced her to be segregated from men and bore him several children. Then 15 years into that marriage, he phoned from Europe and announced he had just divorced her. Devastated, she managed to escape with her children and return to the US. (Read *At the Drop of a Veil*.)

Another student marriage was that of New Yorker Phyllis Chesler, who married a charming Afghan aristocrat. She went with him to Afghanistan only to find herself under virtual house arrest. She was not permitted to leave the house without a minder. When she violated the rules, her mother-in-law stopped providing boiled water for her and she nearly died of hepatitis. Her in-laws flew her home in return for an uncontested divorce. She was lucky to get out alive.

We three women were educated and somewhat sophisticated, but what happens when the women are ill-informed and naive? One good example is the American wife in *Not Without My Daughter*, a woman trapped in post-revolutionary Iran, a trip she never should have agreed to take with a husband who had already gone bad. She risked her life escaping with her daughter.

A Boston woman (Sara Rogers) attending college in New Mexico met a Palestinian from Gaza, a charming coffee shop busser whom she married after a three-day courtship. She knew on her honeymoon that she had made a huge mistake (he was a sexist) but went with him to Gaza and bore him five children. Finally, in desperation, she found the money to flee to Israel with the children. She is one of many who made the same romantic mistake.

Let the buyer beware.

681 words

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