

MARRIAGE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Variations, Vexations,
and Violations

Edited by

*Salman Akhtar, Ann Eichen,
and Andrew Smolar*



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To

MUGE ALKAN
with love and gratitude
SA

PAULETTE and ARTHUR RUDY
for their steadfast support, love, and excellent marital modeling
AE and AS

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development and techniques for including them during psychoanalytic clinical work. He has also published op-eds on mental health subjects in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and in the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*, where he is a regular contributor.

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Introduction

Marriage is the topic of 107 quips, excerpts, stanzas, and witticisms in *The Penguin Thesaurus of Quotations* (1998). Barring three biblical passages and the oft-recited advice of maintaining optimal distance from the poet, Khalil Gibran, all other reflections upon marriage are ironic, humorous, cheeky, satirical, or downright misogynistic and nasty. Marriage is portrayed as a prison, a cage, a burden, a recipe for boredom, and a theater of the mundane. A similarly negative depiction is found in most successful plays and movies about marriage. The pervasive derision appears puzzling given that most people in most parts of the world do get married or want to get married. Could it be that the effects evoked by marriage are actually ambivalent in nature? This appears quite understandable since marriage impinges upon personal freedom, curtails sexual novelty, and forces one to make compromises about matters of daily living while at the same time providing relational constancy, affective holding, and creation of a mutual bank of memories to which one can return again and again for emotional refueling. But if this is correct then why is the negative side more public, turned into jokes, and sublimated into literary creativity? Why does the positive side remain restricted to religious sermons, and “confessions”

of the elderly as to how good it has been to have a spouse by their side all these decades? While ordinary mortals ponder this quandary wordlessly, the great Charles Darwin (1809–82) was unabashed in rendering the pros and cons of marriage in clear, sunbathed prose. Here is what he said:

This is the Question.

Marry

Children—(if it Please God)—Constant companion (and friend in old age) who will feel interested in one ... My God, it is intolerable to think of spending one's whole life, like a neuter bee, working, working, and nothing after all.—No, no, won't do. Imagine living all one's day solitarily in smoky dirty London House.—Only picture to yourself a nice soft wife on a sofa with good fire, & books & music perhaps.

Not Marry

Freedom to go where one liked—choice of Society and little of it.—Conversation of clever men at clubs—Not forced to visit relatives and to bend in every trifle.—to have the expense and anxiety of children—perhaps quarreling—Loss of time ... How should I manage all my business if I were obliged to go every day walking with my wife.—Eheu!! I never should know French,—or see the Continent—or go to America, or go up in a Balloon ... Marry—Marry—Marry. (1838, p. 3, italics in the original)

Darwin's labored clarity and self-persuasive logic notwithstanding, the realm of marriage remains affect-laden, challenging on many psychosocial fronts. Unanswered questions abound. What is the relationship between love, sex, and marriage? Is marriage a developmental landmark without achieving which one is deemed immature and less evolved? Why do marriages fail and why are second marriages generally more erotically gratifying? Is monogamy "natural" and has it ontogenetic substrates or is it an invention of necessity? Do extramarital affairs always betray the psychopathology of one or the other partner or can they, at times, help sustain a marriage? Can marriage contain or ameliorate sexual perversions or can marriage itself be a form of perversion?

What about bigamy and polygamy? How do we define a “dead” marriage? Can broken marriages be fixed? And so on.

Our book seeks answers to these and other related questions. Essays contained in it cover topics that range from the normative to deeply worrisome, from customary to highly unusual, from rapture to rupture, and, dare we say, from sacred to profane. The book opens with a wide-ranging Prologue by Ann Eichen. A Philadelphia-based psychoanalyst, Eichen offers a comprehensive overview of the developmental arc of marriage. Using a psychoanalytic lens, she proposes that marriage requires the capacity for “bi-directional flexibility” across three psychosocial domains: (a) bodily relatedness, (b) interpersonal distance, and (c) capacity for tolerating change. Following this wide-ranging and highly informative Prologue are the book’s three parts, each of which comprises two chapters.

The first part is titled “Variations” and has chapters on same-sex marriage and interracial and intercultural marriages. The former is written by Sameer Khan, a young psychiatrist and psychoanalyst in training from New York. It offers the viewpoint of the LGBT+ community, a group of individuals who, until recently, were legally barred from marrying each other. The discourse this chapter contains relies upon oral and written histories of individuals to create an appropriately decentered narrative and to highlight the multiplicity of experience in the realm of same-sex marriage. The latter chapter is written by two eminent academic psychologists, Pratyusha Tummala-Narra and Arpana Inman from Boston and New Brunswick, NJ, respectively. Their contribution underscores the fact that interracial and intercultural couples face many psychosocial challenges (e.g., rejection by their families, societal marginalization) that affect their relational dynamics as well as their individual identities. On the positive side, however, such couples evolve psychically by mutual cultural immersion and by the integration of their belief systems, behavioral norms, and ethical standards. The chapter also explicates the ways psychoanalytic treatment can provide the “holding” necessary for exploring and bridging painful schisms and ruptures should these arise in the context of an interracial or intercultural marriage.

The second part of the book is titled “Vexations” and has chapters on marriages that are best designated as “perverse” or “dead.” The chapter

on perverse marriage is authored by Olga Santa María, the former president of the Mexican Psychoanalytic Association and a distinguished adult and child analyst whose work has mainly appeared in Spanish language so far. This contribution elucidates three major constellations that link perversion and marriage, namely (a) when a sexual perversion is enacted between the two partners, (b) when a sexual perversion is secretly acted out by one partner, and (c) when the foundation and the structure of marriage is itself perverse. The discourse also touches, in a separate section, upon less prevalent, unfamiliar, and/or newly emerging patterns of marriage (e.g., bigamy, polygamy, sologamy, open marriage) that occupy an ambiguous phenomenological and psychodynamic terrain between adventure and deviation. The next chapter is by the Washington-based psychoanalyst, Anne Adelman, who is the coeditor of the Book Review Section of the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, though writing here in her capacity as an independent contributor to our literature. Her contribution tackles the topic which, to paraphrase André Green, can best be termed “dead marriage.” In such couples, the marital tasks, responsibilities, and pleasures are almost totally, if not totally, absent. Sexual relations, if and when these do occur, are limited and perfunctory; often the couple leads a celibate existence. The individual spheres of work and play on the two partners’ part hardly overlap. Life is routine-bound, mechanical, and devoid of affection. Rationalized bases of social appearance, religious edicts, and concern for offspring (if any) keep the couple together. Adelman illustrates these points by a sophisticated deconstruction of the highly acclaimed movie, *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), and by presenting two detailed clinical vignettes.

The third and final part of the book is titled “Violations” and addresses the topics of marital infidelity and divorce. Chapters on both these topics are written by Salman Akhtar, the first one single-handedly and the second in collaboration with the prolific clinical psychologist, Shawn Blue. The discourse on marital infidelity highlights that various, often contradictory behavioral constellations exist in the realm of adultery. These range from “harmless” one-night stands to devastating long-term, clandestine affairs, and many syndromes between these extremes. Psychodynamic variables contributing to marital infidelity are similarly seen as multilayered, complex, and often quite random and

idiosyncratic as well. The next chapter offers a broad survey of psychodynamic observations on the antecedents and consequences of divorce. It takes into account both short-term and long-term sequelae of divorce as these affect the spouses, their offspring, and even their larger social orbit. The special nuances of divorce in same-sex, immigrant, and analytic couples are also elucidated and the novel concept of a “good-enough divorce” is proposed.

Closing the book is the Epilogue by Andrew Smolar who is a psychoanalyst with extensive experience of working with couples and groups. Bringing his keen and forever alert psychoanalytic attention to the matters of marital discord, Smolar suggests that one should assess multiple factors in weighing the likelihood that couples therapy would be successful. These include physical compatibility, defensive structures, intellectual match, psychological mindedness, shared belief systems, capacity to tolerate disagreement, and common long-term goals. Exemplifying the best of differential therapeutics, he delineates various psychodynamic approaches for different kinds of marital problems and describes his own method of combining individual and couples therapy in certain circumstances.

This thumbnail sketch of the book's chapters is intended to whet the readers' appetite. Obviously, there is more texture, more substance, and more heuristic and technical material in their individual entirety than we have been able to summarize here. What is certain is that the eight chapters of this book, acting in unison, deepen our understanding of the nuances and variations of marriage and of the interventions mental health clinicians can make to help salvage the relationship when it falters or help the partners part graciously when the conflicts within the couple seem too divergent for compromise formations. By imparting insight and knowledge of such sort, the book enhances the readers' empathy and affective attunement to the blend of inevitable conflict and subterranean bliss that characterizes most marriages.