



***Marrying Ameera* by Rosanne Hawke**

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The Story

Ameera is a 17-year-old Australian girl with a Pakistani Muslim father. Her father fell in love and married an Australian but, as his children have grown older he has become more conservative and protective, particularly of his daughter. Ameera is respectful of her father's wishes and understands the duty and responsibilities involved in being a good Muslim daughter, but she is also part of the wider Australian community and is interested in maintaining her relationships and interaction with her friends. Tariq, a Pakistani Christian, the brother of a good friend, Maryam, has only recently come into her life. Unexpectedly, Ameera's father arranges for her to visit relatives in Pakistan for the wedding of her cousin Jamila. Soon after she arrives, however, Ameera discovers that she has been naive; it is she who is marrying her wealthy cousin, Shaukat, as part of a business-based transaction organised by her own father.

When Ameera's passport, return ticket and mobile phone are confiscated by her uncle, Ameera realises she is trapped. There seems no way out of going through with the wedding. Only her determination, courage and a growing sense that she may have a future with Tariq can help to see her through this nightmare. In touch with some people who can help, Ameera waits for rescue, but must go ahead with the marriage while she waits. Ameera's strength, and the love of members of her family and friends, sees her through the ordeal, but the family she knew is destroyed in the process.

Hawke evokes the struggle of wills and ideology inherent in Ameera's story, whilst subtly immersing the reader in the culture and landscape of Pakistan. This story offers much – duty, love, ideals, adventure and passion. It touches on many interesting and pressing global issues through the engaging story of young girl caught between cultures.

Structure

The story begins with another story, that of Hir and Ranjha (p. 1-2)

- Before proceeding consider this story. Do you think it is a true account of something that happened? When is it set? What indicates to you the age of the story?

Three parts

The novel is divided into three parts:

Part One – A good daughter (p. 3)

Part Two – The girl in the mirror (p. 67)

Part Three – A lake of tears (p. 205)

- How does each section heading reflect its contents?
- What is a 'good daughter'?
- Consider what the phrase means to the various characters (Ameera's father uses the term on page 13) within the text and compare this to your own views and those of family and friends.
- To what do the other two section headings refer?
- What is the significance of the drawings and the fonts used on each of the section head pages? What imagery is evoked in these drawings? How does it sit with the actions found within the text?

Language and viewpoints

Hawke skilfully portrays the emotions and attitudes of a range of disparate individuals; she manages to sympathetically demonstrate views that might not sit comfortably with some readers. Hawke's approach is both respectful and subtle, as she allows actions and dialogue to speak for itself rather than preaching a view to the reader. Richardson, writing in the *The Age* (28.08.10) notes Hawke's ability to create complex characters. In this review, Richardson says of the novel:

'The novel also deals well with the problem of how to be a feminist without sounding like a racist or a values imperialist.'

- What does this mean? How do you think Hawke achieves this?

Imagery

Hawke uses water imagery to describe the feelings Ameera has for Tariq (p. 41, 45, 271 and 277). For example: 'His smile washed over me like a wave in a sun-warmed rock pool.' (p. 41)

Using Hawke's work as an example, construct sentences that use an element, or similar, to describe an intense feeling – for example - water, fire, wind or sunshine to describe love, fear, friendship or loathing.

Ameera

Ameera is a complex and interesting character who goes through a range of changes as the text progresses. Her life is not her own, but as the text moves forward, we begin to see the person Ameera is becoming.

- Is Ameera similar in character to anyone else in her family?

- Do you feel she has grown as a person through her experiences?
- Imagine what Ameera might be like in 10 years. Write a short paragraph to share with your class detailing something of this future Ameera.

Themes

Responsibility

- At the opening of the text (p. 5), Ameera is described as her brother Riaz's responsibility. Why?
- Riaz dodges his responsibilities (p. 8). Why does he feel he can get away with this? Would Ameera contemplate a similar 'rebellion'?

Responsible behaviour dominates much of Ameera's world. How she is seen and perceived by those who would judge her is very important. At one point, she and her friends imagine being 'able' to do karaoke (p. 40), but the idea of participating in such an innocuous form of entertainment is beyond their comprehension. It is made very clear that 'A daughter has a duty' (p. 125) that must be taken very seriously.

- We all live with different pressures applied from those around us. Imagine what it would be like to live in Ameera's shoes.
- Using what you know of Ameera's lifestyle from the text, brainstorm the events, sports, hobbies etc that you now participate in which would have to be expunged from your life if you were Ameera.

Ameera's life is strongly influenced by family members. Her auntie says to her: 'It's good for girls to learn early that they cannot always have what they want.' (p. 125) And when Ameera's father arrives in Pakistan (p.192) he tells her that her elders know better (194). He invokes 'God's wrath' and talks of duty, slapping Ameera when she remonstrates with him.

- Do you think this is about responsibility and duty to family, or about gender inequity, control and subservience? Are these intertwined? What sort of influence do family members have on your decisions?

At the end of the novel, Ameera claims she is 'slowly learning not to define myself by what happened to me.' (p. 276)

- What does she mean?
- To whom is she now demonstrating a sense of responsibility and duty?

Honour

Ameera's father, arguing his case, describes another family:

'She isn't Muslim anymore and the whole family is dishonoured. The shame of it. No one respects him. They only think how could he let such a thing happen' (p. 13)

This statement contains a range of intriguing attitudes. There is no consideration for whether the girl who has chosen to not marry a Muslim is happy or not – this appears inconsequential.

- Why is the girl's decision about what she wants in her life linked to the respect experienced by her father?
- Why is it presumed that he can, or should, fully control his daughter's life?
- As with the earlier discussion of responsibility, one may question whether the concern over honour is about this alone. What else is at play?

Early in the text, Ameera mentions the burden of family honour (p. 39) and the importance of doing the 'right thing' (p. 39).

- Is this something that concerns you on a personal level? Do you think it concerns most teenagers?

Ameera's mother says that her husband believes 'dishonour sticks like slander ... stains like dye, you can never erase it.' (p. 53)

- What does she mean by this? Do you agree? Disagree? In what circumstances?

On page 128, Ameera's father claims he wants to keep her safe and that she will honour him by accepting what he wants for her (p. 129). Later in the text, after she is married to Shaukat, he claims 'I know you will be safe now' (p. 220).

- What does he mean by 'safe'? Is he thinking of her physical and emotional well being or is he more concerned with her being 'safe' from dishonour?

Family

Family is the basis of much of Ameera's world.

- How does her family compare with your own experience and that of those you know well? Consider similarities and differences – refer to instances in the text to aid your discussion.
- On page 277, Ameera claims she still loves her father. She claims he acted out of fear and insecurity.
- Do you agree?
- Is love blind to the faults of fellow family members?

Love

Consider the relationship that develops throughout the book between Ameera and Tariq.

- Tariq first mentioned (p.11)
- Phone conversation (p. 35)
- Exploring her feelings for Tariq (p. 48)
- Heart to heart with Mum about Tariq (p. 52-3)
- Tariq's gift and intentions, poem (p. 71)
- Phone call to Tariq – declaration of love (p. 175)
- Tariq sacrifices himself for her (p. 269)
- 'never doubt my love for you (p. 273)
- 'a new story – one in which our love lives' (p. 278)

- Is love what Ameera and Tariq share?
- Ameera's father married for love (p. 48). Why does he not learn from his own experiences?
- Why does he see Ameera's needs as different? Is it only about gender?
- Towards the end of the novel, Riaz tells Ameera that their father's love is
- 'conditional' (p. 258). What does he mean by this?
- How many different kinds of love can you think of? List and discuss.

Culture

- Examine the opening page of the story (p. 5). What does it tell you about the culture, home life, attitudes and expectations placed upon Ameera?
- Rewrite this brief scene from a different perspective; your own culture or one you know well. What do you change to give a sense of the person and their culture? Consider surroundings, objects, dialogue and behaviour. Little things tell us so much as they build context.
- Raniya is the 'perfect Pakistani girl' (p. 6) – what does this mean?
- Ameera's list of things that indicate this are all about outward appearance and behaviour. Why is this so important?
- Ameera feels her dad wants to keep her in the 19th century (p. 30). Do you agree?
- All cultures have different customs and traditions. Ameera's Pakistani heritage is no exception. Consider the following examples, and come up with some equivalents in your own culture:
 - Pakistani politeness (p. 41)
 - Bad manners to ask a woman's name (p. 42)
 - Formalities and gifts despite lateness of arrival (p. 75)

Ameera's experience of her family's village in Pakistan gives her an insight into an existence that is very different to her own in Australia. Revisit the following:

- Beggars at airport (p. 73, 89)
- Squat toilet (p. 76)
- Kangaroo discussion (p. 76)
- Results of earthquake (p. 79, 238)
- Monument (p. 86)
- Bazaar (p. 87)
- Baba who sleeps on the roof (p. 80)
- Boys making carpets (p. 91)
- Making Chapatti's (p. 93)
- Zeba's school – tents, large classes with no teachers (p. 138)
- Henna party (p. 190)
- How different is the culture and daily life of Pakistan from your own?

- Haider has a particular view of what he terms 'Australian girls' (p. 103). Shaukat considers Western society 'decadent', 'hedonistic' and 'self seeking' (p. 247)
- Are these culturally based views? What informs such attitudes?
- When Ameera is made to wear the Burqa she says she 'watched myself vanish' (p. 248). Views on the Burqa are many and varied. Research the different points of view. Discuss what you have found, the images at right, and the range of views in your own classroom.
- Ameera claims 'Papa confused religion with culture' (p. 277). Do you agree?
- How intertwined are the two? They can both inform how we live our lives. Is it impossible to separate them?



Encyclopaedia Britannica defines Patriarchy as a:

hypothetical social system in which the father or a male elder has absolute authority over the family group; by extension, one or more men (as in a council) exert absolute authority over the community as a whole.

- Is this the 'system' under which Ameera lives?
- Is it prevalent throughout other sections of Australian society?
- If this system places power in the hands of only one gender, how and why does it exist?
- How much of who we are and what we do is determined by culture?
- Investigate what is termed the nature versus nurture debate.
- Is Ameera, and how she behaves, a result of her genetics, her upbringing, the world in which she finds herself, or something else?

Faith

- What does Ameera mean when she says 'I was sure Papa still thought in terms of caste' (p. 15). Is caste cultural or faith based?
- Tariq is not Muslim. Raniya says – 'he mightn't have the same code of behaviour as our boys' (p. 16)
- What does she mean? Why does she think that those of his faith will see things only as he does and behave in the way he expects?

- Compare what we know of Tariq and his views to Haider and his behaviour (p.131, 166). How would Ameera's father view Haider's behaviour?
- Tariq questions the belief that people cannot marry for love. He claims it is not in the Koran (p. 37) and suggests that this view is cultural not religious. Are the two inextricably intertwined?
- 'All Muslim fathers are the same. Even Natasha says her father's paranoid about her and they're Australian.' (p. 19) Is the distrust Ameera and Natasha experience about faith, culture or patriarchy?
- Raniya says: 'We gain favour in God's eyes if we submit. It's more important to impress God than to please ourselves.' (p. 20). What do you make of this? Does Ameera agree?
- Ameera has had a taste of celebrating her mother's faith, particularly at Christmas. This is important to her. Why?
- On page 39 she describes her mother's need for a Christmas tree to be a part of her celebrations. Why is it important to Ameera's mother? Why do you think Ameera's father does not want her to celebrate Christmas fully?
- While in Pakistan, Ameera is nostalgic about Christmas with her mother (p. 90)
- What does her cousin say about the Christians that live in her country (p. 90)?
- How do such views come about?

Ameera chants God's name to calm herself (p. 178). Her faith is still strong and important to her despite the fact that religion is tied to the wrongs that have been committed against her. Towards the end of the text, Ameera recognises that her Papa has cast her aside but that her God has not (p. 277)

- What does this demonstrate about Ameera's character?

Tariq claims, at the close of the novel 'My faith commands me to forgive' (p. 273).

Do you think others in the text agree with this sentiment?

Gender

- On page 6, Ameera muses that though a car has been bought for Riaz, one will not be forthcoming for her. Can you find other examples of the different ways in which genders are treated in the text?
- Ameera appears accepting of this injustice. Why?
- Ameera's father claims that: 'girls get into trouble when they have too much independence' (p. 11). Why does he think this?
- Is this just about gender (he allows his wife to drive) or is it more complex?
- On page 130, Ameera notes how her relatives think of her as sweet and compliant. She does not see this as a compliment. Why? Is this about gender only? Ameera's Pakistani relatives are not the only cultural group who construct stereotypes based on gender.
- List and discuss the words that have been historically used to describe a stereotypical girl or a boy (for example a sweet and demure girl or a rough and tumble boy) Consider the sound of the words, the way they make you feel and the pictures they create in your mind. Discuss

Arranged Marriage

The television show *Today Tonight* produced a report in 2007 about arranged marriage. Read the text of their story below and discuss the similarities and differences you can identify between this report and the story you have experienced in *Marrying Ameera*.

Arranged Marriage

Are arranged marriages better?

- *Reporter: Laticia Gibson*
- *Broadcast Date: July 06, 2007*

Statistics are showing that arranged marriages have an incredible chance of working but what makes them so appealing?

The pursuit of true love and ultimately, matrimonial bliss, comes from years of heartache and searching but even then, one in three marriages in Australia end in divorce.

But for millions around the world, that stress of finding a partner is left 100 per cent to mum and dad and that is also happening in Australia.

Shubhadip and Anindita Ghosh have been married for just four months with their union arranged through their parents in India.

"I trusted my parents totally, I thought they will choose for me a better person," Anindita said.

"My parents know me better than anyone else in the world, so they know what is best for me."

With Shubhadip studying in Australia, they met face to face for the first time, just a few days before the ceremony.

"The first time we sat and saw each other and spoke to each other was on the night of our engagement," he said.

"After some days of continuously phoning and chatting we fell in love."

Om and Savita Jhorar have the benefit of hindsight.

Their arranged marriage of 16 years taught them to look beyond physical attraction.

"When you are thinking about long time you change their dress but you can't change the person," Savita said.

Now with two teenagers, the couple said the successful marriage comes down to perseverance and an appreciation of values without constraints.

Anthropologist and relationships expert Bella Ellwood-Clayton said Australians could learn a thing or two about love from such cultures.

"Love is very complex and the type of love Westerners go for doesn't last," she said.

"Arranged marriages only have a divorce rate of 4 per cent compared to Australia which is of course about 40 per cent."

Bella said success is due to the lack of expectations and no preconceptions.

"Traditionally marriage has been about economics and politics and joining families together for inheritance or property so marrying for love is a 20th century phenomena," she said.

*Arranged marriages of all descriptions are a global concept.
South Africa, Canada and Australia have all had a history of practicing arranged marriages.
In India, 95 per cent of marriages are arranged.*

From Today Tonight TV show website at:

<http://au.todaytonight.yahoo.com/article/39941/none/arranged-marriages-better>

At the beginning of the text, Ameera is unaware of the arranged marriage that her father has been planning for some time, she has always expected that she will have what her mother calls an arranged marriage with an element of choice. (p. 13)

Early on, Ameera's father makes his views clear. He says:

'What is choice? My sister didn't have a choice, nor did she think she should. She was a good daughter bringing honour to the family, happy to marry who my parents chose.' (p. 13)

- Why do you think Ameera's father sees his own choices as 'different' (p. 13)?
- Ameera's father says: 'Parents make decisions for their children because they love them' (p. 19). Is this true? Is this love?

Ameera contemplates 'the seventy-five per cent of the world that practised arranged marriages.' (p. 37).

- How do you respond to such statistics?
- How relevant are these statistics to Australians?
- Such high figures indicate that this practice may be more a part of the world than we realise, even part of our own world. Do you agree?

Maryam claims her parents want her to marry a Christian as it would be easier to marry someone who has the 'same worldview' (p. 47). This is not an arranged marriage but it does restrict Maryam to some extent.

- Is a person's worldview linked only to their religion? Consider the characters within the text that are of the same religion. Do they all have a similar worldview?

Ameera's father says, 'It's the family you marry, not the boy' (p. 57)

- How true is this?

Riaz tells Ameera 'You don't have to put up with something you don't want.' (p. 70, 142).

- Riaz is ultimately supportive of Ameera's efforts to stand up for what she wants. Why?

Ameera's arranged marriage makes her feel less than human:

'Like all of us, you are just a game piece' (p. 112-3)

(Dowry sent) (p.124) 'I've been bought'

Chosen for a prize' (p. 157)

'it was a business deal and I was just a pawn' (p. 201)

- Why are these images so powerful? Do you think them appropriate?

After Ameera's passport is taken (p.144), she plans to flee to the Embassy where she hopes to be safe (p. 159). She catches the bus (p. 162-3), but Haider finds her and hits her repeatedly (p.166). There is no response to the beating by family – it is treated as unfortunate but justified (p. 167). Ameera makes a link between her situation and the film *Not without My Daughter*.

- How is Ameera feeling at this point?

The film, and Ameera's reference to it, could be used as a starting point for research into other related or similar stories. Comparisons, exploring the similarities and differences, could be made between these texts and *Marrying Ameera*.

During the wedding ceremony, Ameera does not actually say yes (p. 201-2) and when she signs, she doesn't use her real name (p. 203).

- Is there significance in these small rebellions?
- What effect do they have on others around her?

Father says Shaukat will 'will pull you into line' (p. 203).

- Why does he say this?
- Does he truly know his own daughter?

After Ameera dreams of Tariq she tells Shaukat about him. Shaukat claims: 'You will grow to love me because I will be the one who is meeting your needs.' (p. 234). He also 'commands' Ameera. She thinks he feels he can 'order my heart' (p. 235).

- How does Shaukat perceive marriage and love?

Shaukat, affected by hashish, forces himself on Ameera (p. 240-1). He claims to have hoped for love in an arranged marriage (p. 245) and goes on to justify and rationalise his actions (p. 246). He makes it clear that everything will be alright if Ameera complies (p. 248).

- Is Shaukat also a pawn, or is his a position of power that he wishes to preserve?
- On page 264, Ameera thinks that 'laws couldn't change centuries of customs'. Is this true?

The power of story and storytelling

- What do the stories and songs within *Marrying Ameera* (p.1-2, 56-7, 118, 145) represent to Ameera and her family? Do they represent culture and history, or are they also signposts and guides on how to live life?
- Many of the stories resonate with Ameera. Would the same stories be relevant to others not from Ameera's culture?

- How important to the significance of story is the teller and their relationship to the listener?
- Would the stories have meant as much to Ameera if they had come to her from someone outside her family, or from another culture?
- On page 24, Ameera compares the old stories to the Bollywood movies and Hollywood romantic comedies that she also knows well. She can draw on a variety of stories from different backgrounds and each enriches her. Ameera's father wants her to listen to only one set of stories but she, like most people, is able to juggle many different stories and take from each what she needs without losing what is important to her.
- Why did Ameera's father want to limit her to only one set of stories?
- What stories/ rhymes / songs etc would your family tell to represent them as people? Have other mediums replaced these old stories in western cultures?
- Hir and Ranjha's story (p. 1-2) is Ameera's father's favourite. Why?
- The movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is referred to on page 57. This is a well-known movie and a story that Ameera identifies with. Why?
- Stories are very important to Ameera; they have directed much of her existence to this point. She describes her father –

‘He told me stories, and those stories had taught me everything I needed to know: how to behave, how to treat others, how to obey, and how I would have an arranged marriage’ (p. 56)

- On page 114-5, Ameera's grandmother tells Ameera a story about the Sikh singing song verses that caused a mob to decide not to attack their train thus demonstrating the power of these 'stories'.
- At the very end of the book, though, Ameera says:

‘Those folk tales echoed reality more than I ever suspected but now I choose not to be bound by them. Tariq and I will write a new story – one in which our love lives.’ (p. 277-8)

- Why has Ameera chosen not to abide by the stories that meant so much to her?

Final Thoughts

Eleanor Roosevelt once said: ‘No one can make you feel inferior without your consent’.

- Reflect on this quote in relation to Ameera and other women in *Marrying Ameera*.

Robert F. Kennedy, in a speech in South Africa, said:

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope,

and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

- Consider these views in relation to the text. Can the small efforts of some really change ingrained, heartfelt opinions?
- Do you think Ameera's estranged family will ever see things differently?

Fiction based on Fact

On researching and writing *Marrying Ameera*, Rosanne Hawke writes:

In 2006 I was visiting Pakistan on an Asialink Fellowship for research on an idea I had for another novel. My host school in Murree, Northern Pakistan, became a base to travel from and in between I worked in classrooms and did research in the comprehensive library on Pakistani culture and history, the Pathans, Gujjar nomads, as well as on societal customs such as weddings, folktales, crafts and religion.

The school was tight on security due to a terrorist attack four years previously, but since I had my husband with me, I was able to take many research trips – including up the Karakorum Highway, where we passed the tribal areas of Kala Dhaka (Black Mountain) and Kohistan (Land of Mountains), to Azad Kashmir and other the earthquake affected areas.

It was on that trip to Azad Kashmir that we met an English couple who knew a man from the Forced Marriage Unit in the British Consulate. I immediately could see the idea for a new novel. The next day at the school I was able to do mind maps on the characters and write up an outline. This rarely happens so quickly but all that I had been seeing and hearing for the last five weeks suddenly erupted into this story and I began writing it at once. I also started collecting folktales, cloth, patterns for outfits, news clippings and Pakistani literature.

Although I had spent seven years in Pakistan when I was younger, I felt that this time I understood the richness of the culture so much more than I did before. I was able to visit in local homes, even overnight, and gained much insight into the Pakistani people and customs, including experiencing first-hand Pathan hospitality with its gun firing at parties, and honour, segregation and protection of women. I was taught how to make local foods and parathas and was there during Eid celebrations.

*I was also inspired by certain people that I met. Once I was standing on an earthquake devastated space where a multistorey hotel had stood. All I could find was a piece of china and I looked out onto a wave of tents. A boy watched me. 'Did you lose your house too?' I asked. He nodded. Then he said, 'Come to our place for tea.' That place and moment has found its way into *Marrying Ameera*, as has the beggar boy I saw that day, the train trip we later took to Karachi, seeing a donkey suspended in midair by an overweight cart and visiting Oghi in the shadow of Khala Dhaka (Black Mountain) tribal area.*

I don't think I have an idealised view of Pakistani culture, I know there are positives and negatives as there are in every society, but the heightened awareness of it made me feel secure. For me writing is a way of talking, a way of interacting with the world and making sense of what I hear and see. Sooner or later what I experience becomes assimilated into my work, and that has happened with what I saw and experienced in Pakistan and Marrying Ameerah.

(A journal of my experiences in Pakistan can be found on my website www.rosannehawke.com)

- Hawke claims that 'writing is a way of talking'. What does she mean?
- Is art of any kind about communicating or only about entertaining?
- What is Hawke trying to achieve with her story?

Watch the movies *Arranged* (2007) Jewish & Muslim girls. *Wadjda* (Saudi Arabia 2012)

Related reading

Pakistan

Hawke, Rosanne	<i>Beyond Borders (4 titles), Mountain Wolf, Soraya the Storyteller, The Truth about Peacock Blue, Chandra</i>
Hendry, Frances Mary	<i>Daughter of the Wind (arranged marriage)</i>
Staples, Suzanne Fisher	<i>Homeless Bird</i>
Whelan, Gloria	

Other Cultures and Customs in YA Fiction

Abdul-Fattah, Randah	<i>10 Things I Hate about Me</i>
Ellis, Deborah	<i>Parvana</i>
Baillie, Allan	<i>Little Brother</i>
	<i>The China Coin</i>
Bunney, Ron	<i>The Hidden</i>
Jamal, Nadia & Chandab, Taghred	<i>The Glory Garage</i>
Jiang, Ji Li	<i>Red Scarf Girl</i>
Mankell, Henning	<i>Secrets in the Fire</i>
Mattingley, Christobel	<i>No Guns for Asmir (and sequels)</i>
Meehan, Kierin	<i>Hannah's Winter</i>
Na, An	<i>A Step from Heaven</i>
Pallotta-Chiarolli, Maria	<i>Tapestry</i>
Pryor, Boori & McDonald, Meme	<i>Njunjil the Sun</i>
Ridden, Brian	<i>Sweet Tea</i>
Vondra, Joseph	<i>No-name Bird</i>

Postscript, 2023 You can find many more YA novels now about arranged marriages and other cultures, e.g. *Promising Azra* by Helen Thurloe