



# **RISHTA CULTURE**

**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY BASED ON  
MARGARET MEAD'S CULTURAL RELATIVISM**

Hajra Sumaira Imran

## **Introduction:**

The study of *Rishta* culture in relation to Margaret Mead's Cultural Relativism is a spearheaded subject to analyze its position in the modern period. This research paper investigates the cultural and personal understanding of *Rishta* culture among different ethnicities in Pakistan. The focus of this research is on the perspectives of young people about *rishta* practices in Pakistan and how they perceive it concerning their social and ethnic milieu. Since *rishta* culture is a social practice and the study is ethnographic in its design, cultural relativism is a suitable theoretical framework to navigate this subject. Incorporating this theory, the research would aim to establish a connection between ethnically diverse groups by understanding their culture. The goal is to understand how different cultures approach *rishta* practices and whether there are any similarities with other cultures and is their change possible in the foreseeable future. The research incorporates the viewpoints of culturally diverse participants including Adnan Bajwa, Tanveer Malik, Faiza Liaqat, Bisma Ijaz, Mubaris Kakar, and Nayab Zahid. All of these participants have rational and well-informed opinions on this subject and are speaking from an emotionally optimum standpoint. The discussion covers multifold aspects of the subject in question and gathers an engrossed conclusion on *rishta* culture.

## **Literature Review:**

To establish the basis of this research it is important to emphasize: Marriage, Love, and Matrimony are, and have always been, a tricky business. Tons of literature has been written on the union of two lovers and side by side the pains they have to go through. In English Literature, Jane Austen aced the themes of domestic affairs and drawing room talk around matrimony and also exposed the cultural and social norms acting as barriers. She was a prototype feminist who bravely and justly penned down the kerfuffle around match-making. The match-making theme has also been extensively discussed in the history of the Indian subcontinent.

It has covered the stories of great emperors and empresses like Jodah and Akbar, Razia Sultana and Malik Altunia, Mirabai and Rana Kumba, and so on. Hence, the socio-political situation inspired writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sadat Hassan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Vikram Seth, Ahmed Ali, etc. Stories like Umrao Jaan Ada, Nirmala, Twilight in Delhi, etc, to integrate the themes of conjugal relations in the backdrop of social norms, political scenarios, and complexities of human nature. Sure they were called out on writing this subject and were considered vulgar when the writers took no shame in shaming the society. Nonetheless, the fruit of their bravery has been picked up on by contemporary writers and they are free to expand on it.

The tradition was kept after partition and both Pakistan and India have some wonderful writers who are expanding on this subject. In Pakistan, many female writers have insightful stories that appeal to readers. Digest stories have been a favourite and the most consumed literature among the upper and middle classes.

Now, novels are also dramatized and the genre itself is finding its new themes. The most attractive thing about some of these writers is that they also consider the social and political circumstances adding nuance to the genre of matchmaking. The subject range is wide: from lower to middle and then upper-class dilemmas. Surprisingly, the grievances are somewhat similar across classes.



Writers like Sara Suleri, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Kamila Shamsie are diasporic Pakistani writers who have a more international appeal. But their novels are equally popular and find space in more broadminded readers as compared to conservative ones.

Some of the native writers like Quratulain Haider, Umera Ahmed, Nemrah Ahmed, Farhat Ishtiaq, Tahira Kazmi, and Tahira Naqvi have a more domestic approach and dive deep into the issues of local *Rishta* culture. Among the native writers, each one of them has her own pick and take on the issue.

Writers like Nemrah Ahmed and Umera Ahmed would choose a didactic path pertaining a religious lens and,, eventually, attract a similar audience.

Tahira Kazmi is bold and brave in her stance on feminism and tells the real-time issues of women with a focus on gynae and the medical field.

Farhat Ishtiaq writes about romance and incorporates the conflicts that are faced by women due to the stereotypes and prejudices in Pakistani society.

Tahira Naqvi has a beautiful yet realistic take on marriage and *Rishta* culture exploring it in minute details that may generally escape readers. The open endings leave the readers to decide the ending.

## **Ethnographic Methodology**

The ethnographic study tends to explore the multi-ethnic viewpoints on *Rishta* culture by conversing with a selected group of individuals across Pakistan. It explores how a common practice like matrimony is similar yet different given the racial and cultural backgrounds.

The central argument of this research is to establish whether this practice is kept in line with tradition and how much it has evolved in the wake of modern technology.

It also argues the question of gender discrimination and whether it favours men and women. The goal is to gain feedback from young people and how they see this practice and what change they want in this practice.

To fulfil the aims of this research, the researcher has selected 6 individuals between the ages of 25 to 35; all of which belong to different ethnic backgrounds. All of them have observed *Rishta* culture from a cultural and personal point of view.

The first interviewee is Mr Adnan Bajwa who was born and raised in Punjab and thinks traditions must be kept alive.

The second participant, Mr. Tanveer Malik belongs to Balochistan despite being ethnically Punjabi and has progressive views regarding *Rishta* culture.

Miss Faiza Liaqat is the third interviewee and she wants the Punjabi *Rishta* tradition to be more open and favourable for both men and women.

Miss Bisma Ijaz, the fourth participant, thinks that with changing times, this culture should also evolve and must adjust accordingly.

The fifth participant, Mr Mubaris Kakar, belongs to the Pashtun ethnicity and welcomes change that would serve men and women equally.

The last interviewee is Miss Nayab Zahid, an ethnic Baloch, who is open to the changing winds that would add flexibility to *Rishta* culture.

## Thematic Study

Cultural Relativism was a popular study in the 20th century during the war period when the domains of anthropology were expanded. The research began to move away from primitive ideas such as race determinism and racial superiority which argued some cultures civilized while others remained savage. Hence, a divergence was created within culture relativism, leading to a perspective that views all cultures as equally respectable and celebrates the uniqueness of each.

Margaret Mead is a popular name in anthropology and she greatly contributed to this subject through her field work. Her works included how personalities are shaped by culture and how the contextualization of cultural values can lead to better understanding. Furthermore, cultural relativism is a broad term and branches into further categories that tackle one aspect at a time. For this research, Methodological relativism and Moral Relativism are employed as foundations and their essence echoes in the data analysis.

Methodological relativism bears that the researcher or ethnographer must be culturally unbiased and provide an objective observation of cultures foreign to her. Whereas, Moral Relativism holds that each culture has its own distinctive qualities and they must not be judged as it is impossible to provide a homogenous conclusion.



## Data and Findings

Besides the literature on *Rishta* culture, people have their own experiences and observations to navigate and understand this process. It is a fact that everyone has gone through the pains and gains of this process once or multiple times in their lives. So, to get a broad perspective, six people were chosen belonging to different cultures and they described the *rishta* practices in terms of their cultural traditions as well as their personal experiences.

A series of questions are set to have a brief overview of the *Rishta* practices.

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### How was *Rishta* Culture proposed to you?

A series of questions were set to have a brief overview of the *Rishta* practices. The first question was how the participants got familiar with the *Rishta* process and how they perceived this practice.

Faiza and Bisma, who are ethnically Punjabi, observed their sister's and brother's marriages and found it quite 'demanding.' They explained that there are a lot of questions asked and there needs to be a lot of preparations for the guests without knowing if the result of the meeting would be a yes or no.

Adnan, another devoted Punjabi finds the *rishta* process to be quite 'festive and celebrating.' He sees this process as a collective decision that brings together families and finds it a nice opportunity for families to be there for each other.

Tanveer is a Punjabi Baloch but is nearer to Baloch wedding or *rishta* traditions than Punjabi. He narrates the 'Mehrgarh civilization' of Baloch people that is 12000 years old. Tribes like Dawar and Brahvi have continued the tradition and matches are made between families. Mostly, the 'informal engagement' is done in childhood and the girl and boy have no choice but to say yes. They know that the decision of the elders is final and they have to accept the situation as it is.

Mubaris, an ethnic Pashtoon says that they have a tribal system and the elder women of the family or, most often, the father make the final decision.

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### Rishta culture: positive or negative?

The second question was whether *rishta* culture is practiced positively or negatively and whether there is a balanced approach in this regard. Adnan thinks that the foundation of *Rishta* culture was strong despite some issues but going away from that base has made individuals disillusioned. Bisma thinks that *Rishta* culture is a toxic culture and strongly disagrees with it. Faiza sees it as a practice meant to be positive and constructive but has regressed and become depressing. Apart from the Punjabi viewpoint, the Baloch and Pashtun still have tribal marriages and mostly consanguineous marriages take place. Though the trend is changing in some educated classes, the pace of change is slow.



### What about Rishta uncles and aunties?

When asked about the *rishta* mediators or *rishta* uncles/aunties, the response was not in favour of them. Adnan and Bisma believe that these solicitors are just into “profit” and are less truthful about the sensitive details about families, especially the countenances and demeanour of the suitors. Faiza sees them as important ‘negotiators’ as looking for *rishta* on your own is difficult and the mediators’ services, if dutifully performed, can be productive. Tanveer is a Punjabi Baloch whereas Nayab is an ethnic Baloch and both say that they have a tribal system meaning proposals are sent only within families and there is less individual choice.

The next question navigates the marginalization and discrimination towards both genders and also how Gen-Z or the current generation sees this process in light of social media and dating apps.

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### Who is facing more discrimination and is social media changing this culture?

Now for this specific question, almost all of the ethnicities think that women are being oppressed and given less choice. There is the issue of dowry, personal choice, and then surrender to the process entirely.

Adnan, however, thinks that the *Rishta* culture “serves women” as any problem or issue would be the responsibility of a whole family to solve. Today people are more individualistic as they are copying the Western lifestyle. This deformed adoption of the Western dating process has confused men and women as they can’t practically live it and so everyone is living in an idealistic “bubble.” Women are educated to be free... but from what are they free from and what should they do with this freedom? For him, the current generation is lost and confused—in between adopting the West or choosing their own tradition.

Bisma thinks that the traditional *Rishta* culture suppresses women as they are not familiarized with the world outside and the lifestyle or partner they can choose. So, she is in support of “organized *Rishta* groups on WhatsApp” and social media that can help find a suitor. She is not in favour of dating apps as people are just there to flirt and pass their time. In this way, both women and men would know about their preferences instead of confusing their personal choices with family opinions.

Faiza is in support of the view that women are being oppressed in the *Rishta* process because the burden is not shared. She advocates for a balanced approach that includes ‘realistic demands’ which are not thoroughly materialistic. Also, there must be personal effort and both men and women must be provided space to think clearly before the final answer.

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### Moral relativism in Baloch and Pashtun perspectives

Tanveer points out his answer in relation to his tribal background of Balochistan. He strongly admits that women are being oppressed and they must be educated so they can make an “informed decision.” In Balochistan, a woman has no say in her marriage because she is not told that she can have a choice. Especially because she is brought up in a way to accept everything as it is.

Nayab agrees with this point as she also belongs to Balochistan but she further expresses that this situation is slowly changing due to education. Regarding social media and freedom of choice, Tanveer says that men also don't have any choice except to say yes as their freedom of movement and interaction with the opposite gender is also limited by the cultural set-up. Hence, social media and dating apps have no role in innovating the *Rishta* culture there.

Overall, Tanveer paints a depressing picture as he says that Pakistani men, whoever they are, have only an objectifying and sexist view about women. The 'natural progressives' will point out the tribes that don't liberate their women but themselves would also not introduce their women in social gatherings. He is critical of this hypocrisy which leaves women defenseless as no steps are being taken to listen to their grievances.

Mubaris is a Pashtun and also has a tribal background which makes his experiences similar to those of Tanveer. Regarding discrimination towards men and women in *Rishta* Culture, he talks about the “*Walwar* tradition.” Contrary to the popular and highly problematic thinking about this tradition, Mubaris explains its true meaning. *Walwar* is the amount which the groom's side gives to the bride's side so she can buy dowry or, in other words, shop for her needs. This puts the complete financial burden on the groom's side after the engagement is done.

But this tradition is misunderstood by other communities, especially Punjabis, who think that “Pathans sell their daughters for money.” That being said, he says that now the tradition is for the *Walwar* money to be reduced as it gives a little leverage to the groom side and they pay within their means.

Regarding gender discrimination, he says that men and women both have close to no freedom to meet each other or be intimate in public even if they are married. He says that if women are not given a choice by men, then men have also excluded themselves from this choice. Regarding social media and current changing times, he says that change is visible but only in the educated class. He is supportive of freedom of choice and wants to see men and women making mutual decisions knowing what is being proposed to them.



### **Analysis and Synthesis:**

The responses of all respondents are kept in line with their tradition but there is a strong element of introspection.

While traditions and culture ensure harmony and unity in society, sometimes collectivism kills the individual identity. All participants call for a more inclusive approach in which conflicting voices are heard to form a diverse unity.

There is a desire for a critical analysis of *rishta* culture is done and the pros and cons are recognized. It is refreshing to point out that none of the respondents hold extreme views and there is an appreciation of peculiarities. Also, there is a forward-looking perspective among participants that constructively criticizes the flaws and encourages change towards a better future.



### **Conclusion:**

The 21st century is surely bringing a change and *Rishta* culture is no exception to it. All of the interviewees have a unique response in the backdrop of their ethnic traditions as well as their own observations. All of these individuals are critical and are in support of inclusivity in terms of choosing a partner. They are against the discriminatory practices that perturb both men and women which is pleasant to see as this is what is needed. Keeping culture intact is crucial for the survival of its members but, at the same time, oppressive measures need to be relinquished.

There must be clarity in thought about the wants and needs of individuals so that things are not held back by rigid structures. In conclusion, there must be individual freedom within the cultural set-up so people can thrive in a community without feeling robbed of liberty.



