
"WHITE MARRIAGE" IN CONTEMPORARY IRAN

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Abstract: This essay is an attempt to understand how "white marriage" emerged in Iran and what has been the reaction of government and religious leaders and people to this issue through studying various debates and arguments that has arose around "white marriage" which have been available to me. The subject is significant because Iranian women are living in the patriarchal and religious society and it is clear that in such environment women could be the first and most victims.

In this paper I have pointed out the politics of naming the cohabitation without marriage as "white marriage" in contemporary Iran to defy its stigmatization, and also the pleasure and difficulties of it. This paper also shows Islamic state which wants to have control over sexuality of people with the help of celeries legitimized this practice under the cover of concubine. This could be recognized as an "Islamic clock". It seems the practice of cohabitation emerged in Western countries with different reason compare to Iranian society. In this regard I have tried to examine why "white marriage" is practised by young people in contemporary Iran, and how the issue of "white marriage" was discussed through media.

In this research I mentioned few interviews which were about the topic of "white marriage" and were helpful to develop my argument. I classified these interviews into three main parts, one on reasons of accepting this life style by young people; the second is about the lack of social acceptability and difficulties in this kind of life style; and the third is about the consequences of "white marriage".

I have tried to argue that this life style emerged in a kind of social and cultural conditions which forced young people to practice cohabitation based on their realization. In this regard I have tried to say that Iranian practice has not been the same way that Westerns practiced or Islamic law would be accept.

The achievement of this essay suggested although such new relationship appears to be "modern", but interviews showed that Iranian couples still prefer to practice and expect traditions that they have tried to avoid. It may because they do not have any other sample for a new life style

Key word: white marriage, cohabitation, Iranian women, feminist.

Introduction: The years of '1960s' – '1980s' were a time of great change in Western societies. It was a period full of events and movements and major changes in the economic, social, political situation and mostly there were changes in mind of people. People began to express opposition to domination of Church. They challenged the traditional codes of behavior specially related to sexuality, and demand for free choice got heightened. Changes in the way of thinking and the rise of individualism led to sexual revolution, Hippie movement, and second-wave feminist movement.

Cohabitation was one of the fruit of this revolution and movements. Scholars say that "Cohabitation, sometimes called consensual union or de facto marriage"(Encyclopedia, 2003), and they also claimed that "Cohabitation was obscure and even taboo throughout the nineteenth century and until the '1970s'."This lifestyle was especially propagated during the 1960s and 1970s with rock 'n' roll, hippies and the playboy ideology."(Francois, 2013) "Cohabitation has largely regained acceptance since the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s. So it has increased dramatically, rising 35-fold from 1960 to 2010."(Martin, 2013)

Cohabitation got attention of young couples in Iran recently. Between years of 1986 to 2013 the average

age of marriage increased dramatically. In 2011, the population of unmarried girls and boys who were between 20 to 30 years old reached more than 8 millions. Simultaneously the growth of marriage also stalled in Iran in 2011, and consequently we could observe that the rate of divorce also increased suddenly. For instance the number of registered divorces in 2002 was over 67 thousand cases; in 2013 was over 155 thousand. The ratio of divorce to marriage was 10:3 percent in 2002 and there was 20 percent increase in 2013. In Tehran it was almost 32 percent, and there was a record of one divorce, for every three marriages. A survey of 2011 showed that there was growth in single-person households up to 36 percent in the country. Based on this survey 5.1 million people live alone in Iran. As numbers indicate the institution of family is undergoing dramatic changes in Iran. (Ghodoosi, Bayat, 2014)

However, it seems that these days' marriage and family structure has become too complicated for young generation of Iran. There are some factors that show why young people in Iran find a different way of life to get rid of their social and economical issues which impel them to choose alternative life styles which probably is not acceptable within the Iranian culture and Islamic law. Iranian socialists determine those elements as separation of young couple from

the extended family, the high cost of marriage and divorce, imbalance between economic independency of women and their social status, recognizing only male members of family as bread winner, inability to solve the challenges which often happen between couples and their in-laws (Ibid.)

"White marriage" is a term that nowadays, Iranian authorities and national media use to describe and categorize a form of relationship between girls and boys who don't marry officially and religiously. In this type of relationship, mental and emotional relation, intimacy, economic exchanges, family support, friendship and so on which are part of a marriage institution can be observed. (Ibid.)

"White marriage" and Iranian society: To understand when and how "white marriage" emerged in Iran and what has been the reaction of government and religious people to this phenomenon, studying various debates and arguments that has arose around "white marriage" is helpful. I would like to examine why "white marriage" is practised by young people in contemporary Iran and to understand the issue of "white marriage" by looking at the public discussion over it.

The first reaction to this new lifestyle was from one of the agency of national police which is called social security guard. They tried to distinguish those houses in which single young people of different gender lived together. This happened particularly in Tehran, the capital city of Iran in 2009. The authorities labelled these houses as a place for people who are against the social order in terms of morality. Therefore they levelled the charges of drug addiction, prostitution and burglary. In fact state and media called these people moral deviate. The chief of staff requested the supreme leader that there must be a strong opposition to this new life style. "No mercy was to be shown" for them. He called the act of cohabitation as "shameful" and called the youth in such relationship "Adulterous generation". Tehran Governor also announced to finalize a plan against "white marriage". The name of plan is "promoting family stability".

The other response was from the religious people that "Sex outside marriage is crime under Iran's sharia-based laws, punishable by beating. In cases of adultery, it can carry a sentence of death by stoning." There has been a lot of protests and objections against the term of "white marriage" from different groups in the society. Critics believe that "white marriage" is not a proper word for explaining this kind of life. They suggest cohabitation as a substitute word. Soon the word "white marriage" was substituted by other words such as cohabitation, black cohabitation, and common life without law and so on by critics. As the act of "white marriage" is not acceptable to the Iranian society, these other terms

also could not reduce the disapproval of white marriage.

The magazine Zanan-e Emrouz (Today's Women) for the first time published a special issue discussing various aspects of cohabitation, dubbed "white marriage" in Iran, and explained the reasons of increasing number of unmarried Iranian couples who were living together. This magazine was then banned by the Islamic government. "

When the Zanan Magazine used the word "white marriage", it was based on its interpretation of Quran about marriage. Indeed they used this word consciously to give legitimacy to this life style under the banner of religion and Iranian culture, to replace the negativity associated with this behaviour with the respectable attitude. Sherkat and her colleagues used Islamic feminism as a context for their discourse.

Since "white marriage" became an issue for debate in Iran, various arguments have emerged. Dr. Armaki in 2012 wrote an article entitled "Cohabitation, the Emergence of New Forms of Family in Iran". He argues that the emergence of new forms of cohabitation based on some structural factors such as increasing the age of marriage which is the only way in which people are allowed to have legal sexual affairs within Iranian Islamic culture, shifting norms and changing economic structures, independence and liberation from the tradition and customs and so on.

In another study "urban life and family", Fazeli (2012) uses the word of "co -bedside" instead of cohabitation. He notes that in this kind of relationship, not reproduction, but economic and moral support as well as respect and dignity to each other is the base of this relationship. Though the couple does not talk about their relationship openly, but it is not debauchery. There have been lots of changes in the Iranian society particularly in recent years, that haven't been studied enough.

Some other responses from different perspectives in Iran have demonstrated their stand point about "white marriage". For instance; from the perspective of Marxist and Worker-communist "white marriage" is trying to disregard the tradition and religion in society and it is a huge achievement in terms of modernity and can be a challenge to the Islamic law and government. Some activists of gender equality argue that the "white marriage" is not a social and religious contract, but it's a kind of equal agreement between two people that both of them have equal rights in all the fields. National TV which represent government ideology argues that "white marriage" is a Western product and also recognizes this phenomenon as an anti-religious and opposed to traditional values of Iranian society which threatens the foundation of family.

In the legal marriage women can access few rights, but vulnerability for women is more in "white marriage". For example, there would be no legal support for women who have "white marriage" and they would have to face violence. The women cannot complain because both would be arrested for committing adultery. (Darvishpour, Kaar, 2015). This kind of lifestyle in many cases brings dual life problem to these couples, as they try to hide the important relationship in their life from others, even from their close relatives. (Ibid.)

Financial problems, need to test compatibility to be a couple, lack of belief in marriage, less responsibility and finally the ease to break the commitment as a "back door" for escape are the main reasons for "white marriage".

Shariat Panahi, a researcher in women's issues, articulated five reasons for "white marriage". The first reason is about the formalities and difficulties that marriage ceremonies have, and also the expenses which come before and after marriage. The second is the limitations for both genders especially for women with the formal marriage. Third reason is inequality between two sexes in their rights in marriage. Fourth reason is related to who is the best partner and the fear of failure in marriage, because divorce is still stigma in most of the local community. The fifth reason is related to refusing long-term commitment and responsibility.

Who would choose "white marriage": There was a research in Iran about "white marriage" which was coordinated by a women's magazine. In this research, scholars chose eleven women and two men from different social, economical, educational, religious belief and geographical locations. Interviews showed that all of them had academic education and most of them came from urban middle class. Results indicate that people who were divorced tended to do "white marriage" more than those who were single. Indeed single people chose "white marriage" as a way they can end marriage if they want.

In my research I found few interviews which were about the topic of "white marriage" that I found them helpful for my research essay to develop my argument. These interviews could be categorized into three main parts, one on reasons of accepting this life style; the second one on the lack of social acceptability and difficulties of this kind of life style; and the third one on the repercussions of "white marriage".

The reasons for applying "white marriage": First reason is that the family forces to respect marriage customs and traditions which are common in the society.

Narges, a woman of around 40 years, has always felt marriage as burdensome due to family pressure and customary barriers. She says, the families impose so

much pressure on youth thereby making them burdened. She believes that when the families interfere in the marriage matters the point of class and cultural differences would be highlighted and takes precedence. And also the economic situation will be more complicated. Narges says, but in this kind of life style, there is no need to reply to anyone for what you did.

Niloofer is 38 years old and a PhD student. Ten years ago, she met her partner and since then they are living together. Niloofer is not sure if her partner would accept her family or, her family accepts him. She says that "my attitude is totally different from my family. My parents still stick to their traditional attitudes. Niloofer says, she could not base her life on something of such traditional things.

The second reason is because that couple think practicing equality in this kind of life style is more relevant and important than marriage.

Niloofer says that "I have my personal life. My partner always washes his clothes. It's not certainly my duty to cook. Even sometimes doing something for him, he considers it as my care and kindness.

Elaheh is 32 years and she lives with Saman for last five and half years. She talks about her notion of traditional marriage. In my attitude, my mother wasted and lost her life with so much of suffering." My mother didn't work during her life but she has everything. My father loves her but sometimes he humiliates my mother. I couldn't tolerate it." She says " I don't like those supports as well as I do not like these humiliations."

Narges says that it is right that marriage does limit men somewhat but not as much as it is a limitation for women. Opportunities and chances that are given to men are not given to women. She says, even when men commit something wrong, the community gives them the right and justifies them.

Third reason is about economic issue. Ali, who has been living with his partner for two years, noted that expenses of marriage and divorce are too high and wedding ceremonies and dowries are breaking. Pegah is 25 years old. She lives with Reza since two and half years. She says "we will surely get engaged in permanent marriage. Whenever his financial situation gets better"

Some people go beyond of this box and believe that this kind of relationship is more dedicated than formal marriage.

Saied is 38 years old. He is living with a woman since three years. According to Saied, lack of commitment or lack of loyalty that occurs in this life style also happen in official marriage. He believes that in open relationship chances of betrayal is less, because you stick to your relationship because of your desire and demand.

Lack of approval according to the social norms and difficulties of this kind of life style : Selecting "white marriage" is not an easy choice. Most of these people have to hide their relationships from their family because their life style is not acceptable to all the members of their family. In most cases, families are not aware about the cohabitation of their youth, or if they know, they try to hide it from their relatives and friends.

Sepideh says that her partner's family was traditional and religious therefore they didn't know about their relationship. She said that "she should always leave the house before her partner's parents came to home." She always had tension if she left any sign of herself at home.

Niloofer says her mother and sisters know about her relationship but her father and brother don't know about it. She says that "this life style does have its specific problems. Sometimes, I would like Peyman participate in the celebrations with me, but he cannot come. We don't have official marriage, so people especially in small cities find this unusual.

"white marriage" and its repercussions : The problems of people who engage in cohabitation are endless. It's clear that the majority of the populations are opposed to this kind of relationship for ethical and obvious reasons. But the opposition to such form of life is not limited only to conflicts and ethical concerns. However, sometimes the mentioned facts do arise from the experience of people who live in this kind of relations.

Mina is 32 years. She lived with a man for a short period. Now she is strongly opposed to this kind of lifestyle. She says that women offer all kinds of services but men just enjoy the pleasure of it. She continues that men do cheat women with their stylish and beautiful statements. Mina says, most of men have the view that time has changed and women are at liberty and independent, who's getting married today? She continues that "you don't dare to oppose it. If you oppose it, men state that you are narrow-minded, and of low thoughts. Due to such fears, I always tried to pretend that I dislike the marriage. She says men have neither any responsibility, nor any obligation and not even financial constraints. As well, they have also sexual and emotional relationship. Mina says "if I was, then I would also say marriage is bad.

Prisa is a 35 years old woman who lived with a man. She was hurt both financially and emotionally and has for a long time without peace. She says that she was subject to misuse during the relationship. She continues that the last two years she paid all rent and expenses of the house. Her partner did not undertake any responsibility. When she protested, fighting was the result and then her partner left home. She says, in this lifestyle you don't either have any right, nor has

any stability or any security. You cannot even talk to anyone and always you should hide your relationship. She continues that you are grappling with all of problems all alone. Even if you are beaten, or be subjected to unethical states, you don't have any right to protest because you will get charges. My partner always said marriage was obsolete. She believes, men who are of such thoughts, they cannot accept any responsibility. They are weak. And it's interesting that they convert the weakness with intellectual gestures. People who are proud of their intellects and modernity will not even tolerate such matters if it happens to their sisters and would raise hell.

In another word, the weak point of this relationship is that the couple has to hide their relationship although they think that this is a kind of freedom. Lack of family support, social network, and more importantly, the legal protection to this kind of marriage do cause the people to remain silent against the trauma and the damage of it. When women keep quiet about the violence which happen to them, then their vulnerability increases.

Conclusion : It seems that the reasons which create the need of cohabitation in West countries are totally different from the reasons that Iranians have started to practice this life style. Western ideology emerged against the religious domination and rigid traditions which led to the changes in social norms that raised individualism and transformations in thoughts. The results of these changes effected economically in the life of people especially women who became financially independent, therefore new life style which was suitable for this revolution was required by the people who support sexual revolution, Hippie movement, and second wave of feminism or pornography industry.

But in Iran after Islamic revolution which was renewing religious and patriarchal system, the emergence of cohabitation between young generations was not based on religious opposition. But it has been a response to the restricted environment which is based on old traditions and customs. These traditions and customs not only are adequate to the requirements of the new generation who are facing modernity but also engage them to the economical and cultural difficulties which force them to challenge Islamic law and state rules.

Islamic government didn't accept this practice mainly because it is representing Western culture and ideology; therefore they started to authorize the concept of cohabitation within the religious interpretation. Concubine was the best response that religious authorities offer to the young people who can't effort legal and permanent marriage for any reasons. Indeed Islamic government with this solution refused this Western practice which spread

free sexuality in the society and also circulate Islamic culture.

As sex relationship is still a taboo in Iranian culture therefore Iranian Islamic feminists try to give a satisfactory name under the religious legitimacy to cohabitation. Accordingly they call it "white marriage" and on the other hand Islamic state which wants to have control over sexuality of people with the help of celeries legitimized this practice under the cover of concubine. This could be recognized as an "Islamic cloak".

As a researcher I learned through interviews that the main reason for most of the young people who prefer to practice this kind of life style is because they do not face difficulties which could be common in any life style. Their understanding about this life style is that there is no legal commitment therefore they are free to leave whenever they feel they are not good enough for each other and also they do not have to be accountable to any one for anything. In fact this life style come up based on the social and cultural conditions which young people grow up in and then they decide to practice their own understanding of cohabitation which is not the same with Western

version and even is not based on the Islamic pattern. These young people identify their own moral rules according to their needs within this kind of relationship.

In fact in Islamic government in which the governmental rules are rooted in religion may not produce laws which are based on gender equality and one may not expect the governmental law to support both gender. In my perspective the only reasonable response to the question of if "white marriage" is acceptable or not, is that if there is self discovery which comes from education and individual growth then practicing tradition/ religion/ law that force people to sign a paper couldn't be an obstacle for being commitment or not.

As I understand although such relationship appears to be "modern" interviews in fact show that the couple still practice and expect the same traditions that they have escaped from them because they do not have any other sample for life style. It is clear that in such relationship women are still the first and most victims because they are living in the patriarchal society.

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