

Developing Premarital Relationship and Suitability: *Sharī'ah* Principles in the Light of the Qur'ān 4:3

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Abstract

Marital affairs are one of the most elaborated provisions of sharī'ah directives. Like other fields, Islamic marital ideologies are also affected by globalization and cultural influences. This article aims to explore sharī'ah principles to tackle modernized customs of premarital engagements inspired by non-Islamic practices. Usually, khiṭbah (a proposal of marriage) is considered the earliest stage of the premarital phase. However, the Qur'ān 4:3 mentions a condition that persuades someone towards khiṭbah. Usually dominated by sight, ṭāba is a sensitive humanly state that stimulates liking and love for someone. A close analysis of Islamic traditions reveals three developmental stages of ṭāba having thin membranes between them, separated and studied for possible implications in the twenty-first century. Contemporary studies on premarital behaviours and modern trends of Muslim courtship further elevate the significance of this study.

Keywords

khiṭbah, premarital relationship, Muslim courtship, relationship science, modernization, marriage.

Introduction

Marriage is a sacred bond and the foundation of all noble family ties in Islamic society.¹ Due to its socio-spiritual importance,² most Prophets entered this pious relationship.³ Islam elucidates all sacraments about

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¹ Qur'ān 4:1; 49:13.

² Ibid., 30:21.

³ Ibid., 13:38.

premarital and postmarital phases, i.e., the proposal of marriage (*khiṭbah*), the marital contract (*‘aqd al-nikāh*), matrimonial life (*‘ishrah*), maintenance (*nafaqah*), divorce (*ṭalāq*), children-upbringing and custody (*ḥaḍānah*), inheritance (*mīrāth*), and other overlapping aspects. *Khiṭbah* is usually considered the initial stage of the formal marital process.⁴ However, the Qur’ān⁵ indicates preceding stages of *khiṭbah* by employing one word: *ṭāba*. *Ṭayyib* is an appreciating sentimental state linked with what appears pleasant to human senses and soul.⁶ The word *ṭayyibah* refers to something which purifies or has become purified.⁷ Jurists and exegetes interpreted *ṭāba* as a man’s liking a woman whom he is permitted to marry in Islamic law and is inclined to her.⁸ With reference to marriage, the word *ṭāba* is a premarital concept that encompasses diverse mindful emotional stages and *sharī‘ah* directives, which shape the final decision.

Like many other spheres of human life, globalization also influenced the gender interaction patterns of Muslims. Women tend to pursue professional careers after receiving considerable education where they must meet and interact with men who get more chances of seeing and observing them with minimal hindrance compared to the past centuries. Increasing gaps between puberty and marriage, growing global trends of inter-religious social networking, and impulsive choices of marriage seemingly diminish the role of religion as a mindful, decisive, and protective agent against indecency and divorce.⁹ Given the multicultural geographical location at the nexus of South Asia, exploring the role of Islam in developing relationships and marital customs of Pakistani society is of utmost significance. This research is conducted to highlight the role of Islamic teachings in the intersectional framework of premarital phases in Muslim societies.

⁴ Ibid., 2:235.

⁵ Ibid., 4:3.

⁶ Muḥammad Rawās Qal’ahjī, *Mu‘jam Lughat al-Fuqahā’* (Beriut: Dār al-Nafā’is, 1996), s.v. “ṭ-y-b.”; *al-Mu‘jam al-Wasīṭ*, 4th ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Shurūq al-Duwaliyyah, 2004), s.v. “ṭ-y-b.”

⁷ Qur’ān 39:73.

⁸ Thanā’ Allāh Pānīpatī, *Tafsīr Mazharī* (Karachi: Diyā’ al-Qur’ān Publications, 2002), 2:242; Muḥammad Shaḥī ‘Uthmānī, *Ma’ārif al-Qur’ān* (Karachi: Idārat al-Ma’ārif, 2005), 2:286.

⁹ Fauzia Ahmad, “Modern Traditions? British Muslim Women and Academic Achievement,” *Gender and Education* 13, no. 2 (2001): 137–52.

Contemporary Research on Premarital Behaviours and Stability

The following is a concise review of behavioural research on premarital relationships. The review is undertaken to estimate the direction of related behavioural patterns and the effectiveness or otherwise of certain factors which predict or weaken stability and to explain *sharīah* directives considering the latest behavioural necessities.

Researchers conceptualized commitment in relationships and provided the following types, related influential factors, and behavioural indicators: 1. Personal commitment (attraction to the partner; attraction to relationship; and definition of “self” in terms of relationship); 2. Structural commitment (irretrievable investments;¹⁰ social pressure to remain in the relationship; difficulty level of ending the relationship; availability of alternatives; and relative need satisfaction between current and alternative partners)¹¹; 3. Moral commitment (valuing consistency which supports stability; personal obligations of staying in the relationship; attitude towards divorce and religiosity; and chances of break-up in geographically separated couples).¹²

Scholars also elaborated some behavioural aspects in the Close Relationship Model (CRM) which, if developed, help in premarital relationship stability (e.g., a significant length of time, frequent interactions, partners influencing each other in activities, plans, and decisions,¹³ self-disclosure,¹⁴ number of activities done together,¹⁵ and higher diversity in behaviours which predict a low level of a premarital

¹⁰ Michael P. Johnson, “Commitment to Personal Relationships,” in *Advances in Personal Relationships*, ed. Warren H. Jones and Daniel Perlman (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1991), 3:117–43.

¹¹ Caryl E. Rusbult, “A Longitudinal Test of the Investment Model: The Development (and Deterioration) of Satisfaction and Commitment in Heterosexual Involvements,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45, no. 1 (1983): 101.

¹² John Lydon, Tamarha Pierce, and Shannon O’Regan, “Coping with Moral Commitment to Long-Distance Dating Relationships,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): 104.

¹³ Ellen Berscheid, Mark Snyder, and Allen M. Omoto, “The Relationship Closeness Inventory: Assessing the Closeness of Interpersonal Relationships,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 5 (1989): 792.

¹⁴ Harry T. Reis and Patrick Shaver, “Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process,” in *Handbook of Personal Relationships*, ed. Steve Duck (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 1988), 376–77.

¹⁵ Catherine A. Surra and Molly Longstreth, “Similarity of Outcomes, Interdependence, and Conflict in Dating Relationships,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, no. 3 (1990): 501.

break-up).¹⁶ Studies on couple's conflict before marriage tentatively suggest the CRM's importance in stability. Researchers found that lower conflict levels predict stability¹⁷ in matters of physical intimacy, companionship, recreational activities, and maintenance.¹⁸ Lower persistent argumentation about the same issue and a higher resolution rate are evident in stable couples than those who break up.¹⁹ Researches show that the similarity of race is a strong predictor of premarital stability.²⁰ Couples in stable relationships tend to have more similarities in race, preferred activities, and errands.²¹ External factors like the support of family and close friends predict stability when the length of relationship, alternatives, and investments are controlled.²² Premarital positive illusions tend to develop when one of the partners elevates the importance of virtues in the other. However, Murray and Holmes and Griffin contended the effect of positive illusions on greater stability in premarital relations.²³

Scholars of northwestern Europe introduced theories and models of development and social change, predicting that traits of modernity will overcome traditional behaviours. Industrialization, urbanization, higher education, and economic growth are critical socio-economic features of Developmental Idealism (DI) theory. Scholars of DI defined the modern familial structure as the embodiment of the northwest European household (i.e., nuclear family system, individualism, having decision authority of their marriage, affection as detrimental factors of marital decisions, and a small number of children). These factors, when added up, would consequently reduce traditional family behaviours (i.e.,

¹⁶ Mark Attridge, Ellen Berscheid, and Jeffrey A. Simpson, "Predicting Relationship Stability from Both Partners versus One," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 2 (1995): 254.

¹⁷ Sandra L. Murray, John G. Holmes, and Dale W. Griffin, "The Self-Fulfilling Nature of Positive Illusions in Romantic Relationships: Love Is Not Blind, but Prescient," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71, no. 6 (1996): 1155.

¹⁸ Surra and Longstreth, "Similarity of Outcomes," 515.

¹⁹ Sally A. Lloyd, "A Behavioral Self-Report Technique for Assessing Conflict in Close Relationships," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 7, no. 2 (1990): 265-72.

²⁰ Diane Felmlee, Susan Sprecher, and Edward Bassin, "The Dissolution of Intimate Relationships: A Hazard Model," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1990): 13-30.

²¹ Surra and Longstreth, "Similarity of Outcomes," 514.

²² Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin, "Dissolution of Intimate Relationships," 15.

²³ Murray, Holmes, and Griffin, "Self-Fulfilling Nature."

combined family system, family solidarity, marriages arranged by parents, and many children).²⁴

According to researchers, marital patterns of DI can lead towards wealth, health, and happiness and conversely reduce poverty, depression, and unhappiness.²⁵ The contemporary factors which involve decision-making in the marital domain according to DI are as follows: Men and their parents expect choice and love before marriage more than women and their parents do; women and their parents prefer socioeconomic status and higher education over love because it determines their future welfare; many men and their parents also prefer highly-educated women with high-paying jobs over love but such preference is more common among parents of daughters; men are freer to choose spouses of their desires and attractions than women; love and beauty are critical factors for men and their parents, whereas attractiveness is preferred over love; and a considerable number of people also want their parents to choose spouses alone. However, the percentage of women is higher than that of men.²⁶

In recent years, many researchers applied the economic theory to better understand the behaviours outside the monetary sector. In “The Logic of Life to Marriage,” Tim Harford explains that people like to marry because marriage makes economic sense as “the family has rational roots.”²⁷ The noble-prize winning economist, Becker, explains that rational calculations underpin romantic relationships. According to the theory, a person marries when the benefits expected from marriage exceed that of remaining single. Moreover, one considers the prospect of finding a more suitable spouse and emotional and economical loss of separation before deciding to terminate a marriage contract.²⁸ As many people search for a suitable partner, a marriage market exists. Pollak suggests that balance in the marriage market is determined by estimated gains where foresight can also ruin the marriage. In such a scenario, men and women compete to seek the best mate according to the market

²⁴ Keera Allendorf and Arland Thornton, “Caste and Choice: The Influence of Developmental Idealism on Marriage Behavior,” *American Journal of Sociology* 121, no. 1 (2015): 243–87.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

²⁶ Keera Allendorf, “Conflict and Compatibility? Developmental Idealism and Gendered Differences in Marital Choice,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 79, no. 2 (2017): 337–55.

²⁷ Tim Harford, *The Logic of Life: Uncovering the New Economics of Everything* (London: Hachette, 2010), 88.

²⁸ Gary S. Becker, “A Theory of Marriage,” in *Economics of the Family: Marriage, Children, and Human Capital*, ed. Theodore W. Schultz (London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 337.

conditions and assortative mating (i.e., characteristics like IQ, education, height, ethnic origin, etc).²⁹

Precommitment theory offers a basis that may shape the marriage ideology of a couple. It is applied once a person is considered to be an appropriate mate then the couple-to-be collaborates to reduce risks of marital failure, promote cooperation after marriage, encourage thoughtful decisions about entering into the marriage, realize marital goals for a lasting marriage, and make choices to engage in behaviours consistent with their life goals. Through precommitment strategies, future partners can make choices that minimize predictable strains in long-term relationships by making necessary informal commitments and setting rules against behaviours that threaten the marriage (i.e., extramarital affairs, ways of resolving problems, and developing mutual understanding to reduce conflicts, etc).

The application of the precommitment theory signifies reducing or eliminating future options for the marital partner. Subsequent options or preferences are contrary to long-term interests. These strategies increase self-control and enable the partners to maximize initial utility plans. For those who believe marriage is a rational decision, Scott claims, precommitment reinforces long-term interests and discourages the decision to leave the marriage.³⁰ Precommitment methods help determine the choices that strengthen marital commitment.

Researchers have found that the predictability of self-belief and self-esteem—the components of attachment theory—are stability parameters of the premarital relationship.³¹ Where avoidant and secure men can make the relationship stable and attached for one year but not in long run, anxiousness predicts less stability among men but more in women than avoidant women.³²

From Glance to Commitment: Ṭāba and the Development of Premarital Relations

The Qur'ānic words “Marry women of your choice” (4:3) indicate determining suitability before marriage. Prophetic traditions further

²⁹ Robert A. Pollak, “Marriage Market Equilibrium,” Working Paper No. 22309 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016), 18, DOI 10.3386/w22309.

³⁰ Elizabeth S. Scott, “Rational Decisionmaking about Marriage and Divorce,” *Virginia Law Review* 76, no. 1 (1990): 9–94.

³¹ Vicki S. Helgeson, “The Effects of Self-Beliefs and Relationship Beliefs on Adjustment to a Relationship Stressor,” *Personal Relationships* 1, no. 3 (1994): 241–58.

³² Lee A. Kirkpatrick and Keith E. Davis, “Attachment Style, Gender, and Relationship Stability: A Longitudinal Analysis,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 66, no. 3 (1994): 502.

elaborate stages of *ṭāba* as illustrated in the below diagram followed by the details and applicability of each stage:

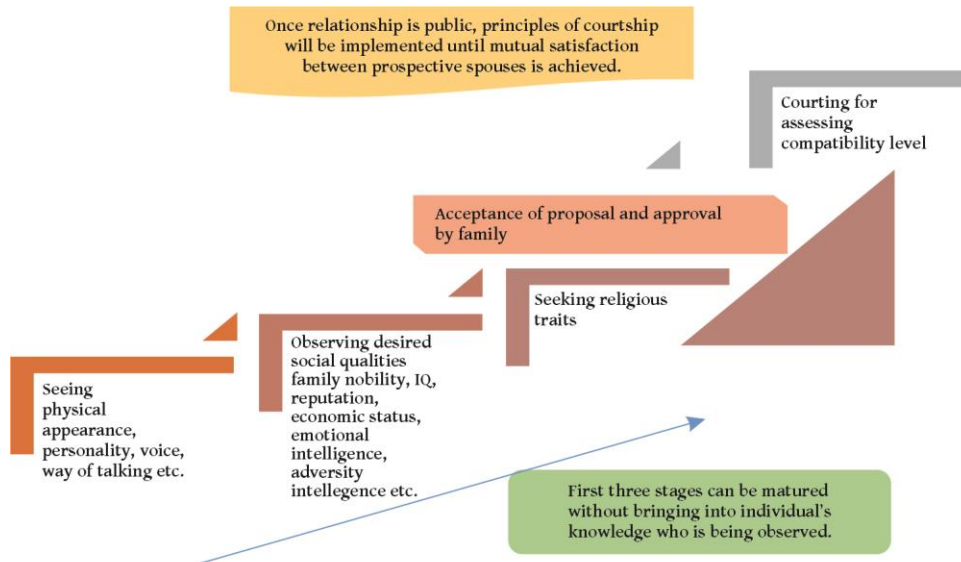


Figure 1: Process of Maturing Premarital Relationship

Seeking Basic Desirable Qualities

The Islamic philosophy of marriage is firmly based on discretion for sustainability and discourages separation between marital partners.³³ Multiple traditions are reported when the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) advised men to see the proposed woman before marriage.³⁴ The reason for the emphasis on seeing a prospective wife is to ensure love and harmony between marital partners and eliminate chances of any appearance or physical disliking.³⁵ However, formal viewing is subject to certain conditions. The traditions indicate that a man is allowed to see a woman in a formal session (*jalsat al-khiṭbah*) only after her family accepts his *khiṭbah* for her or, as in Pakistani society, she has become his fiancée, and/or he has strong intentions of marrying her in the near future.³⁶

Contemporary scholars differ in setting the formal Muslim dress code of women during the proposal.³⁷ Bahī al-Khulī states that with the companionship of his *maḥram* (a relative having a degree of

³³ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-ṭalāq, *ḥadīth* no. 21.

³⁴ Ibid., Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 2082; al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 3235.

³⁵ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 1424.

³⁶ Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *ḥadīth* no. 18317.

³⁷ Muḥammad 'Alī Jānbāz, *Aḥkām-i Nikāḥ* (Lahore: Maktabah-i Quddūsiyyah, 2005), 36.

consanguinity precluding marriage), a man should be permitted to see the prospective wife in a dress she uses to wear in front of her father and brothers at the place she often visits. This would be a more natural way of witnessing desirable qualities. A secluded meeting between a man and a woman is prohibited; at least one *maḥram* of the woman is essential during the formal meeting.³⁸

Many Islamic traditions support the significance of observance before or during decision-making.³⁹ Rational observance in day-to-day social environments would be more authentic when it is not interrupted by artificiality or pretension of the subject being observed. The traditions reported by Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh and Abū Ḥamīd al-Sa‘īdī indicate that observing the woman when she is unaware of the observance is allowed and can cause positive outcomes in later marital affairs.⁴⁰ For example, Sahal b. Abī Ḥathmah reported that he saw Muḥammad b. Maslamah trying to see the sister of Abū Jubayrah when she was on a rooftop with no shade.⁴¹ The seeing and observing before a marriage proposal saves the mental health of the women, as rejection after proposing can cause indignation and harm the self-esteem of the proposed women.⁴² If seeing her is not possible, another woman can be consulted who can observe and mention apparent details.

Preferential Factors for Choosing a Marital Partner

Prophetic traditions indicate the traits people should seek during the observation. Indicating a masculine nature, the Prophet (peace be on him) mentioned four traits of women that attract men: wealth, family nobility, beauty, and piety.⁴³ However, piety is preferred over all others because pious women are the best worldly provision.⁴⁴ Interpretation of the “religious factor” in marriage can be elaborated through the Qur’ānic verses and the traditions in which the Prophet (peace be on him) urged to seek certain traits, praised certain qualities, or discouraged certain behaviours in prospective marital partners. In this regard, Prophetic traditions of the *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic) and *ḥasan* (good) categories are selected and rigorously analyzed to extract the central

³⁸ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-ḥajj, *ḥadīth* no. 1341.

³⁹ Qur’ān 28:26; al-Nasā’ī, *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, Kitāb al-‘adl, *ḥadīth* no. 19769.

⁴⁰ Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *ḥadīth* no. 24000.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, *ḥadīth* no. 18139.

⁴² Gulraiz Maḥmūd, *Daur-i Nabuwwat main Shādī Biyah kē Rasm-o Ravāj aur Pakistānī Mu‘āsharah* (Lahore: Allied Book Centre, 2013), 42.

⁴³ Al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 3230.

⁴⁴ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-raḍā‘ah, *ḥadīth* no. 715.

behaviour traits which are observable before marriage.⁴⁵ Along with observing the qualities specified to the married relationship, a checklist of Qur'ānic social etiquettes should also be consulted to ensure that likelihood is based upon piety (*dīn*) (i.e., honesty and refraining from insulting and ridiculing others, spying, arrogance, backbiting, wasting resources, anger, bribing, breaking oaths, taking too much interest in other's matters, etc).⁴⁶

Recommended Observable Qualities of a Man	Recommended Observable Qualities of a Woman
Modest gazes and strong character ⁴⁷ Cleanliness, well-dressed, and presentable personality ⁴⁸	Modest gazes, character and dressing; avoiding attention-seeking behaviour through gestures and clothes ⁴⁹
Encouraging righteousness ⁵⁰	Encouraging righteousness ⁵¹ Element of obedience in righteous matters ⁵²
Resilience; patience and persistence; engaging much in the praise of Allah ⁵³	Resilience; patience and persistence; engaging much in the praise of Allah.
Tolerance and non-violence; Generosity ⁵⁴	Affection towards toddlers; Austerity ⁵⁵

⁴⁵ During this study, certain widespread traditions were found to be weak (*da'if*) when their authenticity was assessed. For example, one tradition reads, "Nothing is of more benefit to the believer after *taqwā* of Allah than a righteous wife. If he commands her, she obeys him. If he looks at her, he is pleased. If he swears an oath concerning her, she fulfils it. When he is away from her, she is sincere towards him with regard to herself and his wealth" Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no: 1930. Another tradition reads, "If there comes to you one with whose character and religious commitment you are pleased, then marry (your daughter or female relative under your care) to him, for if you do not do that there will be *fitnah* in the land and widespread corruption" *ibid.*, *ḥadīth* no. 2043; al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 1084.

⁴⁶ Qur'ān 49:12; "List of 75 Good Manners in the Quran," Islamic City, <https://www.islamicity.org/14618/good-manners-in-the-quran>.

⁴⁷ Qur'ān 24:30.

⁴⁸ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-ṭahārah, *ḥadīth* no. 253.

⁴⁹ Qur'ān 24:31.

⁵⁰ Al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, Kitāb qiyām al-layl, *ḥadīth* no. 1610.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Qur'ān 4:34; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-ṣawm, *ḥadīth* no. 2459.

⁵³ Qur'ān 33:35.

⁵⁴ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 2142.

Feeling the pain of vulnerability and trying to remove it ⁵⁶	Love and fertility ⁵⁷
Bravery; willingness to help people in need and not seeking anything in return; wisely tackling women-related social problems ⁵⁸ Strength, trustworthiness ⁵⁹	Nobility ⁶⁰ Reluctance to contact the opposite gender ⁶¹
Compassion and sound financial status ⁶² Good ethics and charming ⁶³	Contentment, satisfaction, gratitude, appreciating nature ⁶⁴ Ability to maintain a clean, noiseless, and peaceful space ⁶⁵
Capacity to conceal sensitive information ⁶⁶	Not being excessively jealous or suspicious ⁶⁷

Table 1: Traits elaborating the religious factor in prospective spouses

The above are observable fundamental qualities recommended differently for the two genders by the *sharīḥ*. If an individual seeks some unique desirable traits according to his/her social requirements and domestic context, the Prophet (peace be on him) also approves it. For example, Jābir b. ‘Abd Allah married a previously married woman. When the Prophet (peace be on him) asked why he did not choose a virgin so that she may amuse him, he mentioned the responsibility of his nine minor sisters and that he wanted a woman who might look after the girls, teach them good manners, and not intervene between brother and

⁵⁵ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb faḍā’il al-ṣaḥābah, *ḥadīth* no. 2527.

⁵⁶ Qur’ān 20:10.

⁵⁷ Aḥmad b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Bulūgh al-Marām*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 969. The Prophet (peace be on him) prohibited a man from marrying a beautiful, noble but infertile woman. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 2050.

⁵⁸ Qur’ān 28:23-24.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 28:26.

⁶⁰ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 2051.

⁶¹ Qur’ān 28:25.

⁶² Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-ṭalāq, *ḥadīth* no. 2284.

⁶³ Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, Kitāb al-mutafarriqāt, *ḥadīth* no. 278.

⁶⁴ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-anbiyā’, *ḥadīth* no. 3364.

⁶⁵ Al-Nawawī, *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, Kitāb al-ādāb, *ḥadīth* no. 708.

⁶⁶ Ibid., Kitāb al-manāḥī, *ḥadīth* no. 1627.

⁶⁷ Al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 3254.

sisters.⁶⁸ The *sharīah* parameters and classical examples of making sensible choices when choosing a partner by keeping in view the person's socio-domestic realities, life goals, responsibilities, and behavioural traits indicate that Islam negates hasty, poorly-estimated, and momentary sentimental decisions because emotions change with time. On the other hand, social realities and human nature are constant and durable.

Sharīah Principles of Courtship⁶⁹

Modern dictionaries describe the word “courtship” as a process of developing the premarital relationship—the wooing period before marriage—and seeking the pledge of marriage.⁷⁰ A similar concept is coined as *khitbah* in the *sharīah* when a person proposes someone for marriage. However, developing the premarital relationship is subject to certain restrictions and boundaries in Islam. Therefore, before proceeding to the *sharīah* principles of courtship, it is important to understand contemporary courting practices among various Muslim societies.

Contemporary Patterns in Muslim Courtship

In Western cultures, meeting, dating, intimation, and even cohabitation before marriage are various stages and forms of courtship.⁷¹ However, such practices are not concurrent with the *sharīah* principles. Indigenous traditional courtship customs supervised by family elders are usually considered socially acceptable among Muslims. For example, though arranged marriage is no more a norm in Indonesia, parents are vital in selecting a suitor for their ward in urban areas.⁷² *Midang* and *ngapel* are terms coined for Indonesian courting practice when several men may be allowed to meet an unmarried woman in her natal home in the presence of her parents until the woman's family chooses the best

⁶⁸ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-raḍā'ah, *ḥadīth* no. 3458; Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-maghāzī, *ḥadīth* no. 4052.

⁶⁹ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-nikāḥ, *ḥadīth* no. 1847.

⁷⁰ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “court,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/courting>, accessed July 18, 2020.

⁷¹ Rodney M. Cate, Lauren A. Levin, and Lucinda S. Richmond, “Premarital Relationship Stability: A Review of Recent Research,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 19, no. 2 (2002): 261–84.

⁷² Ariane J. Utomo et al., “Transition into Marriage in Greater Jakarta: Courtship, Parental Influence, and Self-Choice Marriage,” *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 4 (2016): 493.

suitor. During such customary practice, both the woman and her parents can observe and discuss religious adherence and character traits of the man offering *midang*. The other practice is termed *pacaran modern*. It is done outside the home, usually in parks or local beaches, without family supervision. Albeit harmful to the reputation of young women, it is reported to be a widespread courting practice among the youth of Mataram.⁷³

Research has shown the negative impact of shorter premarital duration on marital sustainability.⁷⁴ Courtship, engagement, and signing the legal marital contract (*nikāh*) are three stages of premarital practices in Iran where courtship lasts for a few weeks. Qualitative interviews explored problems like mental unpreparedness, ignoring dysfunctional relationship traits, disregarding justifiable advice of elders, overlooking high-risk behaviours, hiding realities (usually about age, financial resources, etc.), downplaying physical appearance, and infidelity which occurs due to the short time.⁷⁵ Constructing boundaries is another important courting aspect. Conserving their reputation and honour, young people in Syria tend to create their limits during the premarital phase. Syrian men prefer beautiful women and often do not speak to the other gender whereas men are valued financially.⁷⁶ *Khalwah* (prohibited seclusion between men and women) is a convictable offence in Brunei that can result in up to six months behind bars if the offender is proven guilty. Similarly, gender segregation is a social norm among Philippine Muslim youth except during special social gatherings.⁷⁷ Conversely, courtship rituals in India are extensively influenced by Indian cinema (Bollywood) and pornography among Muslim youth. It usually comprises food/dining followed by physical intimacy in secluded places.⁷⁸ Rabiū, Ibrahim, and Sa'ad state similar patterns in Nigerian Muslims, "Factors such as satanic temptation, watching local and foreign movies, novels

⁷³ Linda Rae Bennett, *Women, Islam and Modernity: Single Women, Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Contemporary Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2005), 51.

⁷⁴ Cate, Levin, and Richmond, "Premarital Relationship Stability," 262.

⁷⁵ Abbas Rahmati and Habibeh Bahrami Nejad, "Signs of Divorce before Marriage: The Role of Premarital Events in Iran," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 60, no. 4 (2019): 298–308.

⁷⁶ Lindsey A. Conklin and Sandra Nasser El-Dine, "Negotiating Courtship Practices and Redefining Tradition: Discourses of Urban Syrian Youth," in *Gender and Sexuality in Muslim Cultures*, ed. Gul Ozyegin (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 204.

⁷⁷ Luis Q. Lacar, "The Emerging Role of Muslim Women," *Philippine Studies* 39, no. 1 (1991): 5.

⁷⁸ Kabita Chakraborty, "Unmarried Muslim Youth and Sex Education in the Bustees of Kolkata," *South Asian History and Culture* 1, no. 2 (2010): 275.

and bad peer groups are the key identified inspirational mechanisms for disapproved courtship practices among Muslim Youth in northern Nigeria.”⁷⁹ Though family intervention ensures religious and ethical considerations, physical intimacy among youth before marriage and divorces despite courting indicates a lack of religious sense, self-control, and definite direction of attaining the necessary comprehensive understanding before marriage.

Islamic Courting Principles in the Twenty-First Century

Nikāh is a legal union that determines the moral climate of an Islamic society at large. Indifference to the *sharīah* teachings about courtship and marriage would lead to promoting uncultured globalized elements which can cause suspicion, mistrust, and divorce between marital partners. When traditionalists limited the courting process to seeing, observing, inquiring, and *istikhārah*, modern Muslim scholars tried to counter un-Islamic Western influences and extended courtship limits to direct contacts between expected marital partners by inferring related *sharīah* rulings and teachings from its primary sources. For example, Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Jibālī devoted a whole chapter to courtship in his book which discusses Islamic manners of courting as follows:

1. There should be no *khalwah* (the state of being alone) between the man and woman. Conversation and correspondence are allowed if conducted in the presence of a woman’s *walī* or her representatives.
2. Looking at a man or speaking with him must reflect her nobility and modesty.
3. Looking at a woman should be strictly for the intention of marrying her. It must not involve any touching and lust.
4. Expected partners, their families/representatives, and advisors should provide truthful information about all merits and demerits.
5. Muslim men are not allowed to court a woman whom another Muslim man is courting.
6. Internet courting is not reliable.⁸⁰

Javed Ahmad Ghamidi believes that such courting restrictions are placed as *sadd- al-dharīah* (blocking of the lawful means to an unlawful end) against the core issue, *zinā* to ensure that neither the dignity of a

⁷⁹ Aliyu Alhaji Rabiū, Dahiru Inuwa Ibrahim, and Jaafar Sa’ad, “Islamic Principles on *Khiṭbah* and Courtship versus the Effects of Social Media on Muslim Marriages in Northern Nigeria,” *Jurnal Syariah* 27, no. 1 (2019): 135.

⁸⁰ See Muḥammad Mustafā al-Jibālī, *The Quest for Love and Mercy: Regulations for Marriage & Wedding in Islām*, rev. ed. (Arlington, TX: Al-Kitab & as-Sunnah Publishing, 2005), 40-54.

Muslim woman is harmed nor is she associated with a man other than her husband before marriage.⁸¹ Nuruddeen Lemu of Nigeria explicates five principles of inter-gender interactions and evolves Islamic courtship by incorporating diverse Muslim cultural practices which are not against *sharīah* principles, usually termed as ‘*urf*’.

1. Purity of intentions: Intention of getting to know the other person should be pure and wholesome (i.e., to know the other person better whether for marriage or to work with them in matters of enjoining right and forbidding wrong which believing men and women are obliged).⁸²
2. The purpose of the meeting should be *ḥalāl*: Good intentions do not make something permissible that is prohibited in the *sharīah*. Thus, the purpose of knowing the other person better should be *ḥalāl* and permissible in Islam.⁸³
3. No physical contact: It is mentioned in the Qur’ān that believers should not involve in anything that may lead to *zinā* and sexual immorality.⁸⁴
4. Meeting in privacy is prohibited: The man and woman should not meet in privacy. The Prophet (peace be on him) always met women in public space even to discuss a private matter.
5. Seeking modesty in behaviour: Muslims should observe Islamic teachings regarding modesty in dressing and behaviour. Looking at the other person should be modest, humble, and with lower gazes. The gaze should not be lustful and dress should be appropriate.⁸⁵

Parents, Imāms, religious teachers, sensible marriage candidates, and centres of Islamic learning and counselling can contribute to syncing *sharīah* courting principles with indigenous cultural practices and fast-tracking realities of the twenty-first century.

Conducting Islamic Courtship through Mindful Questioning

Being ‘*ibād Allāh* (servants of Allah), life is a precious gift for Muslims to fulfil the purpose of their existence on earth.⁸⁶ Islam attached much importance to the institution of marriage which is a source of achieving

⁸¹ Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, “Dating, As Per Islamic Culture? Islamic Courtship, for Marriage,” 2002, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEEmOis1qSs>.

⁸² Qur’ān 9:71.

⁸³ “Some of my people will assuredly drink wine calling it by another name,” Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-ashribah, *ḥadīth* no. 3688.

⁸⁴ Qur’ān 17:32.

⁸⁵ Nuruddeen Lemu, “Guidelines for Courtship in Islam,” 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Clwf6Up8TN8>.

⁸⁶ Qur’ān 51:56.

socio-spiritual attainments. *Khitbah* is a period before marriage when a prospective couple can lay strong foundations to achieve higher moral, social, and spiritual standards afterwards. When it comes to meeting a suitor before marriage, Muslim counsellors reported a dearth of exact direction and sense of assessment. Sheikh Sajid Umar mentioned a lack of vision, the purpose of life, and dependency for appropriate courtship questions among Muslim youth. He suggested that life should be envisioned in which an individual wants to create clarity about it with regards to the person with whom their whole life will be spent.⁸⁷ Similarly, Alpha-Him Jobe advised not to attempt hasty fictional marriages based on beautiful photographs, phone talks, and formal gatherings. Rather, individuals should try to approach and assess others in their informal and natural atmosphere again and again.⁸⁸ Mufti Ismael Menk emphasized knowing the individual out of their family context by giving the courting person a decisive position because they are going to be the one who has to spend their whole life with the other person. Thus, educating individuals about related *sharīah* principles and training them to obtain maximum useful information in a limited time for laying a strong basis for a sustainable marriage is indispensable. According to Mufti Menk, at times people have to meet the opposite gender to work together or know each other. Such meetings must be conducted in a way that is permissible in Islam and respectable to society. If someone wants to know more about the other person, then Islam teaches how to involve family or society in the process, “Sometimes we have to understand the *dīn* and what we are taught rather than doing something that is not even the part of the *dīn*.”⁸⁹

Unlike Western premarital practices, Muslim courting is reinforced with *sharīah* principles, guidelines, and restrictions ensuring modest standards. Muslim youth are not allowed to engage in prolonged and unchecked courting by unnecessarily revolving around default questions (i.e., hobbies, preferences, cooking style, favourite dishes, romantic chit-chat, etc). Instead, Muslim scholars drafted certain questions that a potential spouse should be asked to access their mind, plans, and character. Major categories, questions, and underlying assessment of possible replies are represented in the following table:

⁸⁷ Sheikh Sajid Umar, “Pre-Marriage Confusions: What Should I Ask Her or Him?” 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzEZzXpFIDs>.

⁸⁸ Alpha-Him Jobe, “Fair Knowledge of Each Other before Marriage,” 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UUrZ9BrT4.

⁸⁹ Ismael Menk, “How to Get to Know Someone for Marriage? Ask Mufti Menk,” 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ylcwmdTEI1Y>; Umar, *Pre-Marriage Confusions*.”

Major Categories	Courting Questions	Underlying Assessment
Belief	Who is your favourite Muslim scholar? Or which religious scholar(s) do you prefer to listen to? What are your religious expectations from your wife/husband?	To know about their religious beliefs and attitudes and guess about possible religious disputes in the future ⁹⁰
Religious practices	Do you offer Fajr prayer? Or will you wake me up for Fajr prayer after marriage?	In modern times, only those who sacrifice the comfort of bed seek Allah's pleasure. The more a person seeks Allah's pleasure, the more they will be responsible for their matrimonial obligations. ⁹¹
Family plans	Do you like children? Or how many children would you like to have? How are your relations with your family? What relation do you expect your spouse to have with your family? How will you sort out the problem if relations	A committed potential spouse would not surpass or negate this question. Only a "courting lover" would try to abstain. ⁹³ This indicates what is their status in the family and whether their family respects them and values their

⁹⁰ Assim al-Hakeem, "What Questions Should I Ask the Potential Spouse during the Marriage Interview?" 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf-NahXDpSw>.

⁹¹ Al-Kauthar Institute, "The One Question You Should Ask a Potential Spouse," 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0PG_iwhKvc.

	with your family turn sour? ⁹²	opinion.
Work plans	Would you allow me to pursue my studies/job after marriage? What do you think about utilizing a babysitter or maid?	The reply would reveal whether the person is committed to the dreams of their marital partner or not. ⁹⁴
Previous and future relationships	Did you like anyone before of the opposite gender? What do you think about second marriage/divorce etc.?	Seriousness about marital sustainability and current relationship. ⁹⁵
Behaviour patterns	What makes you angry? How do you deal with anger? How much time do you take to forgive someone? What will you do if I fall ill for a long time?	Reveals the person's attitudes in crises, way of disagreeing, level of patience, optimism, stubbornness, and resilience. ⁹⁶
Importance of life partner	What life goals do you want to achieve in the long-term and near future? And/Or How can your spouse assist you in accomplishing your life goals? ⁹⁷	The more a person depends on their spouse emotionally or professionally, the more the other would be valuable matrimonially.

Table 2: Questions to be asked from a potential spouse

Although the observations of elders and witnessing a person reacting to various situations cannot be easily substituted, courtship questioning would facilitate estimating the compatibility between an individual's life

⁹³ Muhammad Salah, "Questions to Ask during First Meeting in an Arranged Marriage," 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZnncPkb2h4>.

⁹² A. Rehman and H. Al-Khattab, "Questions to Ask a Prospective Spouse," 2008, <https://www.islamicity.org/8450/questions-to-ask-a-prospective-spouse/>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Lisa Killinger, "The Big Questions About Your Potential Spouse," 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4PHOm8WZMg>.

⁹⁷ Rehman and al-Khattab, "Questions to Ask a Prospective Spouse."

goals, family context, and imaginations. Major categories carrying related questions can be added or altered in the above table as per individual requirements. At the same time, Muslim scholars highly recommend listing important inquiring points before the meeting.

Conclusion

In the Qur'ānic verse 4:3, men are addressed to marry (up to four) women who appear favourable to them. *Ṭāba* is a Qur'ānic concept that indicates that men appreciate certain instincts of the opposite gender. However, both men and guardians of women are asked to seek suitable traits for a lasting marital bond, allowing Muslims to conceptualize individual agency and choice in the crucial decision of marriage. In traditional Asian societies like Pakistan, the premarital phase is usually authorized by family elders, which adds developing and stabilizing factors like social pressure, the difficulty level of ending a relationship,⁹⁸ family support, and controlled length, alternatives, and investments.⁹⁹ If the process of *ṭāba* is initiated and developed on a couple-level, piety, similar geographical location,¹⁰⁰ number of activities done together, similarity in the race, preferred activities and errands,¹⁰¹ and assessment of the importance of virtues in each other¹⁰² will facilitate suitability. *Ṭāba* is a multifaceted, complex, and impulsive natural process which the *sharīah* bridles through directives for each stage of liking (seeing, observing, seeking favourable traits, and courting) to achieve the purpose of life in a broader religious sense. While contemporary research focuses on human behaviours for seeking premarital stability, overlooking the fact that people endure, evolve, and change due to the external environment,¹⁰³ Islamic principles lead to identifying human nature and constant traits, specifically essential for marital life, family formation, and a lasting peaceful and progressive household. Thus, in the modern era of globalization, Islam is not a restricting but an enabling force for neutralizing cultural barriers and advancing understandings of relationships.

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⁹⁸ Rusbult, "A Longitudinal Test of the Investment Model," 101.

⁹⁹ Felmler, Sprecher and Bassin, "The Dissolution of Intimate Relationships," 13–30.

¹⁰⁰ Lydon, Pierce, and O'Regan, "Coping with Moral Commitment," 104.

¹⁰¹ Surra and Longstreth, "Similarity of Outcomes," 501.

¹⁰² Murray and Holmes, "The (Mental) Ties That Bind," 1228.

¹⁰³ Surra and Longstreth, "Similarity of Outcomes," 514.