THE BEAUTY OF BANGLADESHI WEDDING RITUALS

Words by Tahmina Begum

As an unofficial Bangladeshi wedding connoisseur, who attended 29 weddings in 2012 alone and recently squeezed four wedding engagements into 48 hours, I've been a part of many matrimonies and witnessed several journeys. The J-word may sound trite but it seems to be the only word sufficient to describe a string of wedding ceremonies across a few months.

Traditional Western weddings are a mystery to me. The fact that so much focus is put onto one day is romantic (in a kind of Disney princess way) but slightly odd. You mean to say that two people exchange their vows in front of those they love with no aunties in the background discussing whether the food is any good and what everyone's wearing? And then they jet off to live their perfect fairytale lives all by themselves? There's no 'wedding gate', no numerous outfit-changes and no mendhi paste in sight? To someone who grew up in a culture where getting married is arguably the absolute pinnacle of a woman's life, focusing it on one day only is as alien to me as say, eloping. I don't even think there's a word for such a thing in Bangla.

New friends are often surprised when I tell them that I can't imagine not getting married. It's not out of my desire to have a man in my life or tick a box, it's more to do with the way I've seen brides and grooms rejoice in bringing the biggest of blessings back home. That scene in *Bride and Prejudice* where they are dancing in the streets because "a wedding has come to town" is truly not an exaggeration.

Weddings nowadays are centred around family and new chapters instead of it being seen as the central thread in a woman's life. The start of a new life beginning is a world away from say, my grandmother's time when the feeling that the death of a girl's innocence was prevalent. The patriarchal focus on a bride and her virginity have shifted and merged into many women unapologetically stepping into womanhood. As my grandmother says, "Weddings today compared to when I was younger are as different as night and day." My grandmother got married at the age of 14, a marked contrast to the women who get married nowadays when they feel they're ready to do so and well into their 30s. When I ask if she thinks traditions will change, she replies, "They already have."

So, what are these traditions, these rituals and how does it all begin? For health worker and newlywed, Jasmine, 30, it was the *synifan*. A simple dinner where gifts are exchanged and both sides of the family get together to lay their cards (and past) onto the table and negotiate on what will happen to the couple once married. Where will they live? Who will continue working after a baby is born? "It's also where you discuss the *mahur* (a backup plan)," Jasmine recalls. "If the marriage were to break down, what's in place for the wife, especially if she has children? It's going over the safety net." A synifan can also be breaking points for couples if terms are not agreed upon which is why only immediate family members are invited. *Synifans* are seen less and less as more couples are having a life with their partners before they get married, nowadays it's usually skipped.

There are some things that haven't changed. For example, if you've ever driven past a house with twinkly lights all over the exterior and an extravagant archway in front of the doorway made out of red and pink roses in a non-festive month, that's a South Asian *shaadi* (wedding) house. The interior of the home is decorated with sweet flowers and garlands and you feed the bride some *mishti* (Indian desserts) so the marriage starts off sickly sweet. Sisters of the groom decorate the honeymoon room in petals, a fragrant welcome into the family and married life.

Usually, the night before the mendhi (a ceremony where the bride's hands and feet are applied with henna), when everyone is gathered, an off-key noise will cut through the room. Everyone will become silent then all the aunties, grandmothers and even great-grandmothers will join in on songs usually about rivers, or boys they've loved before. *Gith* (folk songs) continue to be sung by the elders while millennials try to twerk (without being glared out by their parents) to classic Punjabi bhangra hits from the noughties. Shout out to RDB.

After dipping and dancing to the different music played and sung in the room, you'll join loved ones in carving fruit in the shape of peacocks, swans, baskets. Flowers such as roses and shapla (water lilies) are produced from the flesh of watermelons, cucumbers and even strawberries. I have much experience in murdering countless honey melons when trying to execute a miniature 'love boat' filled with fresh flowers. These gifts are to be then individually presented to the bride on a *taal* (bejewelled tray of gifts) as family members enter the mendhi and speak outwardly of the blessings this new chapter will bring.

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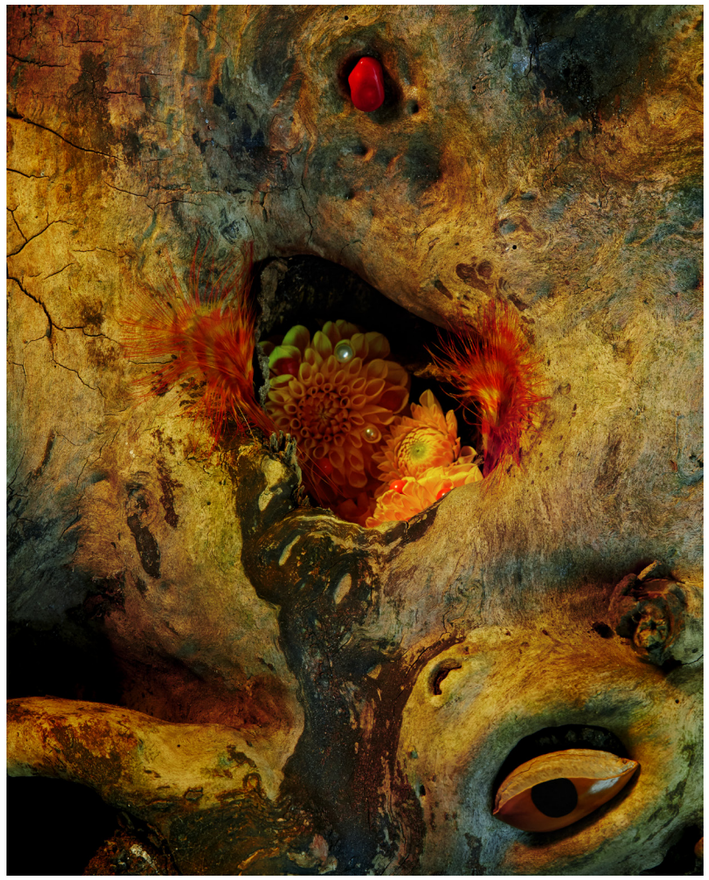

All of this may sound decadent, detailed and even time consuming but there’s something romantic in announcing to the world that marriage is about to take place. What can sound like such an effort in celebrating two people in love—from the garland decorations to placing Tesco’s entire fruit and veg display in the kitchen—are a way to put the bride and groom at peace. Desi weddings are deliberately a process so that one day you don’t wake up in shock that you’re about to be married to someone for the rest of your life.

In all of the meaningful rituals that make up a wedding, unsurprisingly the *mendhi* was the event that every bride mentioned as being the most important for them. Named after the henna that paints the bloodlines of the bride’s palms and across her arms, newlywed and teacher, Shanara, 30, explained that “The idea behind the ceremony is that family members prepare the bride for her wedding by making her beautiful and this celebration allows the bride some time to reflect. Married women even offer the new bride some advice beyond the wedding day.”

My mother tells me about *mendhis* and *gayalouds* in the motherland, how haldi (turmeric) paste covers a bride’s body so that she will literally mimic the sun while aunties dance with their hips and cousins get ready in their chosen (and usually colour co-ordinated) outfits. New wife Jasmine explained that because the *mendhi* is held a few days before the wedding it’s a way to look around and appreciate what you have. “It’s also the last party you’ll have before doing things with your other half,” she adds. My mother also mentioned how though there’s dancing and singing all night, there’s a feeling of shedding an old identity and giving everyone around you the chance to witness and accept that. In my experience, this will happen while Shakira’s “Hips Don’t Lie” plays in the background.

On the big day, Bangladeshi wedding games are played tongue-in-cheek (or should I say *gulab jamun* in cheek?) as a way to remind us that there should always be humour in marriage. As a faux test of the groom’s love, bridesmaids will hold up a ‘wedding gate’ so the groom and his side cannot pass into the wedding hall until he essentially proves his love (usually done by bribing the younger bridesmaids with money or answering some trivia about the bride). Elsewhere newlyweds have to fish a wedding ring in a bowl of rose petals to see who’s going to wear the trousers in the marriage.

Another thread that runs through South Asian weddings is the gold. From the ancestral jewellery that is passed on to the bride down to the wedding invites being covered in ornate work and trimming, it’s a consistent theme throughout. At Shanara’s wedding, she chose to have the traditional *churri* (bangle) ceremony. “I don’t really see this done anymore at weddings but it’s one of my favourites. This is where the husband gives the bride her bangles. Traditionally the bride will wear them until her husband dies and often they will become family heirlooms steeped in tradition and stories.”

The couple also went on to exchange vows in front of their friends and rounded up the matrimony with the *maala* ceremony, a moment where garlands are placed around each other’s neck. When I asked Shanara why she chose to keep traditions that were also closely tied to religion when she and her partner are atheists, her logic was simple. “It’s a staple tradition and was all that was needed to marry once upon a time. If there is any ceremony that captures the essence of this culture it has to be that one.” It’s also the Bangladeshi version of now being able to kiss the bride. You are now officially married.

The middle of a Bangladeshi wedding is the most similar to other cultural weddings. Families sit down to feast on different meat and fishes over many courses while speeches are read out in between. Also like other cultures, the letting go of a daughter or beckoning in a new one is perhaps the most important of all of the wedding rituals. Though the idea of a woman going from being a daughter to a wife may seem archaic it’s symbolic and can prepare someone for their new beginnings. “My whole wedding day was about giving me away” reminisces Jasmine. “So I walked in with both my parents and then, towards the end, left with my husband. Before this happens, the bride’s parents place the couple’s hands together and your new mother-in-law and father-in-law take them into their own, as a way of promising that you will be looked after.”

There is also the *bidday*, (the goodbyes), where your parents place you into the car and let you ride away with your husband. All brides mentioned that their emotions ran high at this point. For many South Asian women, getting married is the first time you move out of where you’ve always known to be home or have a romantic relationship openly. This can all sound old fashioned but when I spoke to brides who described the *bidday* they all looked misty-eyed about it, almost as if they were shedding their old skin only to be wrapped up in now two layers of identity.

Following these moving goodbyes, a reunion is not long away as a breakfast feast is brought to you the morning after the wedding day by your family and friends as a way to mark the first day of your marriage. Families come over in the early hours to embrace you and your new life with baskets of things you may need around the kitchen. I’ve seen everything from muffins, sweet vermicelli and a new kettle being brought over with a selection of teas.

There’s also the cutting of the fish on a *da*—a special cutting instrument. Daughter-in-laws perform this ritual before making a dish for both of thebride and groms families as another way of bringing everyone-together. Sometimes the fish is dressed up as the bride and groom—I’ve seen many a fish wrapped in red saris and sherwanis.

With so many rituals to remember, perhaps many that have already been forgotten, traditions are changing as the diaspora of South Asia is absorbing a myriad of cultures from around the world. The meaning behind being South Asian is changing frequently, not just generationally. Newlywed and actor, Afshan Azad, 30, agrees that in terms of traditions and rituals weddings are already becoming simpler, however, a bride and new mum, Fahmeda, 29, hoped they would last a while longer. “These traditions truly do make your wedding unique. I still get emotional thinking about my bidday,” she says. “This is all is part of our identity and looking back at my wedding pictures I feel proud that I celebrated these rituals as my ancestors did before me.” In 2019, all these ceremonies and details can seem like such a fuss but for many of us, it’s what keeps us grounded. It’s a deep-rooted reminder of what we’re taking with us while on the way to where we’re going. In simpler terms, Bangladeshi weddings are messages of life-long hope, unity and acknowledge that a love that encompasses everyone around you is not a thing of the past.