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From The Afghan Women’s Writing Project

# Khastegari

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I never heard a voice say, “Will you marry me?”

From my childhood until I was grown, I only went to one engagement party. It was for the love marriage of my friend at university. I was so happy that day and when the young groom took the bride’s hand, I cried and prayed, “God, dear God, excellent work! Always do like this!”

But it was only once. Since then, the engagement parties I have been to have all been for couples whose marriages were arranged by the old traditions.

When a boy wants to marry, he sends his family members, including his mother and sisters and others, to the house of the girl he wants to marry. We call this tradition Khastegari.

It is different in every province, but in most cities life for boys is the same as girls: they do not select a bride; they follow the rules and when the father selects the girl and the family, the boy should agree. If not, the dad says, “You are not my son anymore.”

Lucky boys are allowed to choose a girl, but this is not easy because a boy must have a rich father or an inheritance from his grandfather to afford marriage. A boy must have a house, a car, and enough money. When I talk about enough money, I mean more than about US$30,000  to marry a girl.There are other costs he must pay:

* Toyana – money the family of the groom pays to the bride’s family
* The Engagement Party – a luncheon thrown after a family accepts a marriage  proposal on behalf of a daughter
* Sherni Khori – A party after the engagement party, sometimes called the marriage party
* The Henna Night party

The wedding day itself does not have to be very big or expensive, but many families have to borrow money for the marriage. Afterwards, the newly married couple must pay back the money, so instead of having a honeymoon or starting a wonderful life together, they worry about how they will pay back the borrowed money.

Khastegari starts when the mother, sisters, or the boy himself go to the house of the girl to talk with her mother about the girl. They do not make a marriage proposal the first time. They can make a marriage proposal to the mother of the girl on the second visit, but it usually takes four or five or more visits. The girl is not allowed to meet the family of the boy or even ask questions about the boy, such as where he is from or how old he is. It is shameful for her to ask questions; if she asks or appears in front of the boy’s family, people call her Cheshem Safed or “white eye.”

When a marriage proposal is made, the boy’s mother, sister, or close female relatives  start by telling what is good and best in their son. Sometimes, they exaggerate. If her son is blind, she says, “Oh, my son has big, big eyes like almonds!” Or if the boy is bald, she says, “Oh, he has such nice hair!”

Then she changes the tone of her voice and says, “Please accept our son as your servant!” After marriage, when the man is a husband, people will use this to excuse any kind of violence the man might do to his wife. They say, “But on the first day, his mother did ask, ‘Please accept him as your servant.’ ”

After the proposal, the girl’s mother tells the father, and then the father and brothers decide whether to accept it. They think about whether the boy is educated, polite, comes from a good family, and can take care of the girl’s future life. Sometimes it doesn’t matter if he is uneducated or uses drugs; money is more important for some fathers.

Girls who are luckiest are asked by their family if they agree with this engagement, but in most cities in Afghanistan, girls cannot decide for themselves about marriage. Girls must respect the idea of parents because they are taught that parents know everything, they are always right, and they want happiness for their children.

In the last step of Khastegari, the men from the boy’s family go to the girl’s house, the families meet, and the girl’s family accepts the engagement.

Then the mother will say what is best about her daughter. They also exaggerate. The mother will say, “My daughter can cook all kinds of the foods in the world.” Sometimes when the girl gets married she can’t even make tomato soup, she burns the onions in the oil or her food is always salty or sour!

On the day of the engagement, the girl’s family prepares the Sabad gul–a big gift, usually flowers, sweets and chocolates–and either the father or the brother gives it to the boy’s father. Sometimes the boy attends, but in most families he does not have the courage.

Then, the boy’s family must pay the Toyana, more than US$10,000, to the family of the bride. It seems like this is when the girl’s family sells her. Some fathers make a list of all the expenses he spent on his daughter from the day she was born. It is always interesting to see the families who are so sad when a daughter is born, but when the daughter gets married, good money goes into the pocket of the father.

When the boy’s family takes the Sabad gul it means the boy is formally engaged. Everyone is smiling. Young boys get new clothes and dance in the room for male guests, and girls with stylish clothes and make-up dance in the room for female guests. Then they have the grand luncheon, and when the guests leave, women play music on the Diyra, and the girls sing a song:

Gula bordem, Barge gula bordem  
Az khani baby arose, shemi dila bordem

It means:  
We have flowers, they are with leaves, from the house of the bride we got a gift, power, and heart’s strength.

During the party, the bride can hear the singing but she is locked in a room and not allowed to participate or see the boy to whom she is engaged.

After this, the families announce the Namzady, or engagement, and end the Khastegari by putting the Sabad gul on a shelf of the groom’s house to symbolize adding new member to the family.

In families where the girls and boys are allowed to take each other’s hand and be in the party, it is especially fun. This is the party called Sherni khori, which means sweet eating. Only the female guests are allowed to see the bride and groom, but the boy and girl cut a cake and there is an engagement ring.

But in all of this, every decision depends on the boy’s family. Girls should accept anyway. I have never seen a girl stand in front of a boy and bravely tell him, “I want to marry you.”

She cannot break the rules because if she did she would lose her family and it is not possible to live without family.

By Norwan