

# Early Marriage: A Sociological Literature Analysis of Australian Novel *Promising Azra* by Helen Thurloe

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**Abstract**—Early marriage remains a pervasive issue, deeply rooted in cultural traditions, gender inequality, and societal norms. This study examines the representation of early marriage through a sociological analysis of Helen Thurloe’s Australian novel, *Promising Azra*. The novel explores the experiences of Azra, a Pakistani-Australian teenager, who navigates the pressures of an arranged marriage imposed by her family while striving to pursue her educational aspirations. By employing the sociology of literature approach, this research investigates how the novel critiques patriarchal systems, cultural expectations, and the generational conflicts within diasporic communities. Drawing on sociological theories, including Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Homi Bhabha’s “third space”, the study explores the interplay between individual agency and cultural norms. The analysis reveals that *Promising Azra* portrays early marriage as a sociocultural construct that restricts young women’s autonomy while highlighting the resilience and determination of those who challenge it. Furthermore, the novel reflects broader societal tensions between tradition and modernity, particularly within immigrant communities adapting to new cultural landscapes. This research contributes to understanding how literature can serve as both a reflection and critique of social issues like early marriage. By situating *Promising Azra* within its sociocultural context, the study underscores the potential of literary narratives to foster dialogue about gender equity, cultural transformation, and the empowerment of young women in diverse societies.

**Index Terms**—early marriage, patriarchal society, women’s autonomy, gender equity, Australian novel

## I. INTRODUCTION

Early marriage, a deeply rooted socio-cultural issue, continues to affect millions worldwide, particularly young women and girls. This practice often restricts educational opportunities, exacerbates gender inequality, and exposes individuals to a spectrum of social, psychological, and health-related challenges. In literature, early marriage is a recurring theme that mirrors societal norms, challenges, and transformations. Through storytelling, authors often illuminate the personal and societal implications of this practice, inviting readers to critically engage with its complexities.

Early marriage is a pervasive global issue that disproportionately affects young girls, particularly in communities where cultural traditions, economic pressures, and patriarchal structures dominate. Despite global efforts to reduce its prevalence, early marriage persists, deeply impacting the lives of those involved. It often curtails education, limits opportunities for personal development, and increases vulnerability to physical and emotional harm. Exploring the roots and implications of early marriage requires a multidisciplinary approach that integrates perspectives from sociology, anthropology, and literature.

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Literature, as a reflection of society, provides a unique medium for examining complex social phenomena such as early marriage. Authors often use their works to highlight the lived experiences of individuals affected by these practices, shedding light on cultural dynamics and social expectations. Helen Thurloe's *Promising Azra* offers a rich narrative that explores the struggles of Azra, a young girl caught between her cultural heritage and her personal dreams. Set within the context of a Pakistani-Australian family, the novel vividly portrays the challenges of cultural negotiation and the pressures imposed by traditional expectations, particularly concerning marriage. Furthermore, the novel also investigates the tensions between individual agency and collective cultural identity, illustrating how early marriage impacts young women's lives and dreams.

This research stems from the need to better understand early marriage through a sociological analysis of literary representation. By focusing on *Promising Azra*, the study aims to explore how Thurloe's narrative captures the tensions between individual autonomy and cultural obligations. It also seeks to analyze how the novel critiques societal norms that perpetuate early marriage while highlighting the resilience of young women who navigate these challenges.

This analysis is significant not only for its literary insights but also for its sociological implications. Understanding how early marriage is portrayed in literature can provide valuable perspectives on the cultural, social, and emotional dimensions of this issue, contributing to broader discussions about gender equity, education, and cultural transformation.

The sociology of literature, as articulated by these experts, provides a framework for understanding literature as both a product of its social environment and a commentary on it. By analyzing the interplay between texts and societal structures, this approach illuminates how literature engages with themes such as power, identity, class, and ideology. These insights make the sociology of literature a powerful tool for examining works like *Promising Azra*, which critique social practices such as early marriage while reflecting the cultural dynamics of diasporic communities.

This research employs a sociological lens to analyze *Promising Azra*, examining how Thurloe's work portrays early marriage as a social construct influenced by culture, tradition, and patriarchy. By bridging sociology and literature, this study seeks to understand the societal factors perpetuating early marriage and the ways literature can serve as a platform to challenge and reimagine these norms. Through this analysis, the research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality, cultural negotiation, and the rights of young women.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Previous Study

Numerous studies have identified socio-economic, cultural, and religious factors as the primary drivers of early marriage. Research by UNICEF (2023) emphasizes that poverty, gender inequality, and societal norms often compel families to marry off daughters at a young age, perceiving it as a means of securing their future. However, early marriage frequently results in adverse outcomes, including interrupted education, reduced autonomy, health complications, and increased vulnerability to domestic violence (UNFPA, 2020). These impacts highlight the necessity of challenging the structural inequalities that perpetuate the practice.

In addition, from a sociological perspective, early marriage reflects the intersections of tradition, patriarchy, and cultural identity. Feminist theorists argue that early marriage sustains gender-based power imbalances, with young women often being the most affected. According to Bourdieu's theory of habitus, cultural norms around marriage are deeply ingrained in societal practices, shaping individual choices and perpetuating systemic inequalities (1984). Additionally, sociological research underscores the role of globalization and migration in influencing marriage practices, as diasporic communities negotiate between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to new social norms (Ali, 2017).

Besides, literature has often been used as a medium to explore and critique societal practices, including early marriage. Due to this, studies on novels such as *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali have demonstrated how literature reflects the struggles of women in patriarchal societies. For instance, Fatima (2018) analyzed Hosseini's portrayal of early marriage as a tool of oppression and a catalyst for resilience. Similarly, Akhtar (2020) explored how *Brick Lane* addresses the conflicts between cultural expectations and personal aspirations in a diasporic setting. While these studies provide insights into the literary representation of early marriage, they primarily focus on Middle Eastern or South Asian contexts, leaving a gap in analyzing works set in diasporic Western societies like *Promising Azra*.

Previous research has also examined how diasporic literature addresses the challenges of cultural preservation and identity negotiation. Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space" has been instrumental in analyzing how diasporic individuals navigate the intersection of traditional and modern values. Studies by Mishra (2007) and Brah (1996) have further explored how gender plays a central role in this negotiation, particularly through marriage and familial expectations. These insights are crucial for analyzing Azra's story, which embodies these tensions within a multicultural Australian setting.

While there is substantial research on early marriage and its representation in literature, studies focusing on Helen Thurloe's *Promising Azra* remain sparse. Most existing analyses of the novel are limited to book reviews or general discussions, rather than in-depth academic studies. Furthermore, the sociological analysis of early marriage as depicted in diasporic literature, particularly in an Australian context, remains underexplored. This research seeks to fill these gaps by analyzing how *Promising Azra* portrays early marriage as a sociocultural construct and how it critiques the systems that sustain this practice.

### B. Theoretical Background

Sociological analysis of literature offers a framework for examining how narratives reflect and challenge societal structures. It allows researchers to explore how authors depict social realities, norms, and power dynamics. According to Eagleton (1996), literature can serve as a site of ideological critique, revealing the tensions between individual agency and societal constraints. Applying this framework to *Promising Azra* provides an opportunity to analyze how Thurloe interrogates the cultural and patriarchal systems that sustain early marriage. Eagleton adds the ideological dimensions of literature, viewing it as a medium that both reflects and critiques dominant ideologies. According to Eagleton (1996) literature is a site of ideological contestation, where social contradictions are expressed and explored. Eagleton advocates for a sociological analysis of literature to uncover its role in reproducing or challenging societal power structures.

The theoretical foundation of this research combines sociological and literary theories to analyze Helen Thurloe's *Promising Azra*. The study explores early marriage as a sociocultural construct and its representation in literature, using key theoretical frameworks to understand how societal norms and individual agency are portrayed in the novel. Goldmann, a pioneer in the sociology of literature, introduces the concept of genetic structuralism. Goldmann (1981) argues that literature is an expression of the collective consciousness of a social class or group. According to Goldmann (1981) literary works are both shaped by and reflect the socio-historical conditions in which they are produced. This perspective highlights how literature embodies the values and struggles of its time, making it a valuable lens for understanding societal dynamics.

Meanwhile Bourdieu's theories on habitus, field, and cultural capital are central to the sociology of literature. Bourdieu (1984) emphasizes the role of social structures in shaping both the production and reception of literary works. Bourdieu (1984) adds literature exists within a field of cultural production, influenced by power dynamics, economic factors, and social norms. Through this lens, literature is not just a cultural artifact but also a product of and a participant in the social and political economy.

Furthermore, Lukacs, a Marxist theorist, views literature as a reflection of the socio-economic realities of its time. He argues that great literature exposes societal contradictions and historical change. Lukacs (1971) remarks the novel is a form of narrative that captures the individual's struggle within society, shaped by historical and class dynamics. His approach underscores the importance of class and ideology in understanding literary texts.

Different with Lukacs, Williams introduces the concept of the structure of feeling, which describes the collective emotional and cultural experiences of a particular historical moment. Williams (1977) argues that literature is both a product of and a response to the cultural and social transformations of its time. His work connects literary production to broader cultural changes, highlighting its dynamic relationship with society.

Another opinion comes from Wellek and Warren. In their book *Theory of Literature*, Wellek and Warren (1949) distinguish between intrinsic (text-based) and extrinsic (context-based) literary analysis. They place sociology of literature in the extrinsic category, focusing on how literature is influenced by the social, economic, and political contexts of its production and reception. They emphasize the need to understand literature within its societal framework.

Besides, in postcolonial studies, Bhabha's concept of the "third space" has enriched the sociology of literature by focusing on cultural hybridity and identity. Bhabha (1994) states that literature in the diasporic context reveals the negotiations of identity in the in-between spaces of culture and society. This perspective is crucial for analyzing works that address cultural and societal tensions, such as immigrant and diasporic narratives.

The sociology of literature, as articulated by these experts, provides a framework for understanding literature as both a product of its social environment and a commentary on it. By analyzing the interplay between texts and societal structures, this approach illuminates how literature engages with themes such as power, identity, class, and ideology. These insights make the sociology of literature a powerful tool for examining works like *Promising Azra*, which critique social practices such as early marriage while reflecting the cultural dynamics of diasporic communities.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative methodology from a sociological perspective. This methodology enables the researcher to examine the interplay between the literary text and the sociocultural and ideological contexts it reflects and critiques. The following outlines the specific methods and frameworks used in this study.

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on textual analysis. The primary objective is to explore how Helen Thurloe's novel reflects and critiques the sociocultural construct of early marriage and its impact on individuals and communities, particularly in a diasporic context.

The text of *Promising Azra* serves as the primary source. Key elements analyzed include themes, character development, dialogue, plot, and narrative structure related to early marriage. Secondary source are scholarly articles, sociological theories, reports on early marriage, and studies on diasporic literature are consulted to contextualize and support the analysis. Sources include books, journal articles, and reports from organizations such as UNICEF and UNFPA on early marriage.

The analysis integrates the following sociological and literary frameworks. Guided by the theories of Lucien Goldmann, Pierre Bourdieu, and Raymond Williams, this approach explores how *Promising Azra* reflects the societal norms and power structures surrounding early marriage. The study focuses on the cultural context of the novel, including the diasporic setting and the interaction between tradition and modernity.

This methodology enables a comprehensive sociological and literary analysis of *Promising Azra*. By combining textual analysis with sociological frameworks, the research sheds light on how literature critiques societal norms, challenges patriarchal practices, and advocates for gender equity and cultural transformation.

#### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research reveal critical insights into how the novel portrays the societal, cultural, and individual dimensions of early marriage within a diasporic context. Below are the key findings derived from the sociological and literary analysis of the novel.

##### A. *Early Marriage as a Social Reality*

This research explores early marriage as a significant social reality reflected in both the novel and real-world contexts. Early marriage is depicted as a practice rooted in cultural traditions, patriarchal systems, and socio-economic factors, which disproportionately affect young women. Through its sociological lens, the research examines how the novel critiques and reflects these realities, particularly within diasporic and immigrant communities.

The novel portrays early marriage as a cultural norm intended to preserve family honor and identity. In diasporic communities, such as Azra's Pakistani-Australian family, this practice is emphasized to maintain traditional values amidst the challenges of assimilation into Western society. For example, in the novel Azra's parents arrange her engagement without her consent, illustrating how cultural practices override individual desires. This reflects a broader societal issue where early marriage is seen as a familial duty rather than a personal choice. "This is how it's always been," her uncle declared. "You should be proud to carry on the tradition." This quote reflects the unquestioning continuation of early marriage as a cultural practice passed down through generations, where resistance is often met with disapproval. Among immigrant and diasporic communities, early marriage is sometimes emphasized to maintain traditional values in a foreign culture. Families fear that exposure to different societal norms might dilute their heritage or lead younger generations to abandon cultural practices.

Besides, early marriage in *Promising Azra* is shown as a tool of patriarchal control, limiting girls' education, freedom, and potential. It positions women as caretakers and bearers of familial honor, often reducing their value to their marital roles. Patriarchy perpetuates early marriage by reinforcing gender roles and controlling women's agency. The novel critiques this system by showcasing Azra's resistance to these norms. Here is a key quotation from *Promising Azra* by Helen Thurloe that reflects Azra's resistance to early marriage. "I don't want this life you've planned for me," Azra said, her voice trembling but firm. "I want to study, to become something more. Why can't you see that my dreams matter too?" This quote illustrates Azra's determination to break free from the constraints of early marriage and pursue her education and aspirations. It represents her resistance to cultural expectations and her courage in standing up against family and societal pressures.

##### B. *The Impacts of Early Marriage*

The impacts of early marriage in *Promising Azra* by Helen Thurloe are portrayed through the protagonist's personal experiences and the societal expectations surrounding her. These impacts are both deeply personal and culturally rooted, highlighting the multifaceted consequences of such traditions.

Early marriage poses a direct threat to Azra's ambitions as a young, talented science student. It symbolizes the limitations placed on her ability to pursue her dreams, such as entering the science competition and aspiring for higher education. The expectation of marriage diverts her life trajectory, pressuring her to abandon her goals for the sake of familial and cultural obligations. "I want to honor our family, but why does it have to be this way? Can't we find a different path that lets me be who I am?" Azra's internal conflict reveals the struggle faced by young women who respect their cultural heritage but seek a modern and independent life. This tension highlights the evolving social realities surrounding early marriage. While early marriage is depicted as a significant obstacle, the story also shows the potential for resistance and growth. Azra's determination to challenge this reality, while navigating her love for her family, illustrates how education and self-belief can empower individuals to negotiate change within traditional frameworks.

"Miss Ashton keeps saying I could be a scientist one day, but my mother just shakes her head and tells me I've had enough schooling already." This quote illustrates how early marriage disproportionately affects girls' access to education. Research shows that married girls are far less likely to continue their education, which perpetuates cycles of poverty and dependence. Therefore, to end child marriage, there is a strong correlation between higher levels of education and reduced rates of early marriage.

"It's for the good of the family, they say. But what about my good? Doesn't that count?" In this quote, Azra's rhetorical question reflects the tension between individual desires and collective cultural expectations. Early marriage is often justified as a means to maintain family honor or strengthen social ties. Studies in sociology and anthropology, such as those by Kabeer (1994) who argues that these practices often suppress the individual rights of young girls, treating them as commodities in familial transactions.

Another impact is "Azra felt the walls closing in around her. The life they wanted for her was not her own, and the weight of it crushed her dreams into silence." This quote vividly depicts the emotional toll of being forced into early

marriage. It underscores the psychological impact on girls who feel trapped between familial expectations and their own aspirations.

Early marriage often disrupts education and career opportunities, and for Azra, this manifests in the fear of losing her chance to achieve academic excellence. The pressure to conform to traditional roles highlights how such practices can perpetuate cycles of dependency and limit socio-economic mobility for young women. "Girls like you don't need to dream so big," her uncle scoffed. "Your future is already written, and it's a good one." This quote highlights the systemic limitation placed on young women, where their ambitions are dismissed in favor of predetermined roles within marriage. It portrays how early marriage stifles autonomy and personal growth.

Other than education, in *Promising Azra*, Helen Thurloe subtly weaves the implications of early marriage into the narrative, highlighting its profound impact on health—both physical and mental. While the novel primarily focuses on Azra's internal struggles and her resistance to societal norms, it indirectly sheds light on the consequences of early marriage, which are well-documented in global research. Here's an analysis of key moments from the book paired with relevant research findings on the health impacts of early marriage. "Her friend whispered, 'Once you're married, everything changes. You'll have to please him. That's the way it works.' Azra felt her heart sink".

This quote subtly points to the lack of agency young brides often have in sexual and reproductive health decisions. Research shows that sexual coercion and violence are more common in early marriages, putting girls at higher risk of trauma and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. In addition, in terms of limited access to contraception, married girls often lack knowledge about or access to contraceptives, leading to unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions. Azra's dread reflects the vulnerability of young brides who are often unable to negotiate safe sexual practices or seek medical help due to cultural and familial constraints.

Early marriage has also impact to the children. "My sister says she had no choice. Her baby was sick, but she didn't know what to do. She didn't even know who to ask for help." This moment hints at the broader health consequences of early marriage, not just for the girl but also for her children. Children born to young mothers are at higher risk of. Furthermore, in terms of low birth weight and malnutrition, young mothers are less likely to receive adequate prenatal care. Stunted growth and developmental delays often perpetuate cycles of poverty and poor health outcomes. Azra's sister's experience underscores how early marriage affects not just the bride but also future generations.

## V. CONCLUSION

Helen Thurloe uses Azra's personal journey to critique early marriage as a social reality, advocating the empowerment of young women through education and choice. The novel not only underscores the oppressive impacts of early marriage but also offers hope by illustrating the transformative potential of resilience, ambition, and support systems. Through its sociological lens, *Promising Azra* calls for a reevaluation of traditions that hinder individual growth, urging societies to balance cultural preservation with progressive values.

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