

Muslims demand end to instant divorce

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A divorce practice that is banned in Pakistan and may be outlawed in India has been described as “really common” among Muslims in the UK, prompting Islamic scholars to call for change.

Some Muslims believe a husband has the right to end an Islamic marriage in an instant simply by repeating the word *talaq*, meaning divorce, three times to his wife. Women cannot use the method, known as “triple talaq”.

The practice is prohibited in Pakistan and is the subject of a Supreme Court case in India, both countries where Islamic marriages are legally recog-

nised. Islamic marriages are not acknowledged under civil law in Britain, leaving women with little power to escape an unhappy or abusive marriage, or to defend their interests in court when a marriage breaks down.

A prominent Islamic scholar in Britain has called on Muslim women to ensure they also register their marriage under civil law to provide legal protection, while campaigners have called for an update to 70-year-old marriage laws to demand the civil registration of all religious marriages.

Church of England, Jewish or Quaker marriages must be registered under the Marriage Act 1949. Those who marry in Islamic, Hindu or Sikh ceremo-

nies are not obliged to do so. The Muslim Women's Network said “significant numbers” of Muslims in Britain do not register their marriage. Women often face homelessness and a loss of assets after divorce, the group said, adding: “This is especially traumatic when children are involved.”

Qari Asim is imam at the Leeds Makkah mosque and often represents British Muslims. He said women could demand equal divorce rights in a pre-nuptial agreement, but added: “If the marriage was registered in English law, then the talaq doesn't have much significance and they'd still have to go through the courts. That's why there is encouragement, in the interest of

women and families, that all Islamic marriages are at the same time registered under English law.”

Dr Asim said Islamic law suggests *talaq* should initially be uttered just once, and only spoken a second and third time after cooling-off periods of at least three months.

He said some men say *talaq* thrice in quick succession to demand an instant divorce and added that mosques were trying to discourage it, particularly during wedding preparations.

“It wouldn't be wrong to say men are abusing that right,” Dr Asim said.

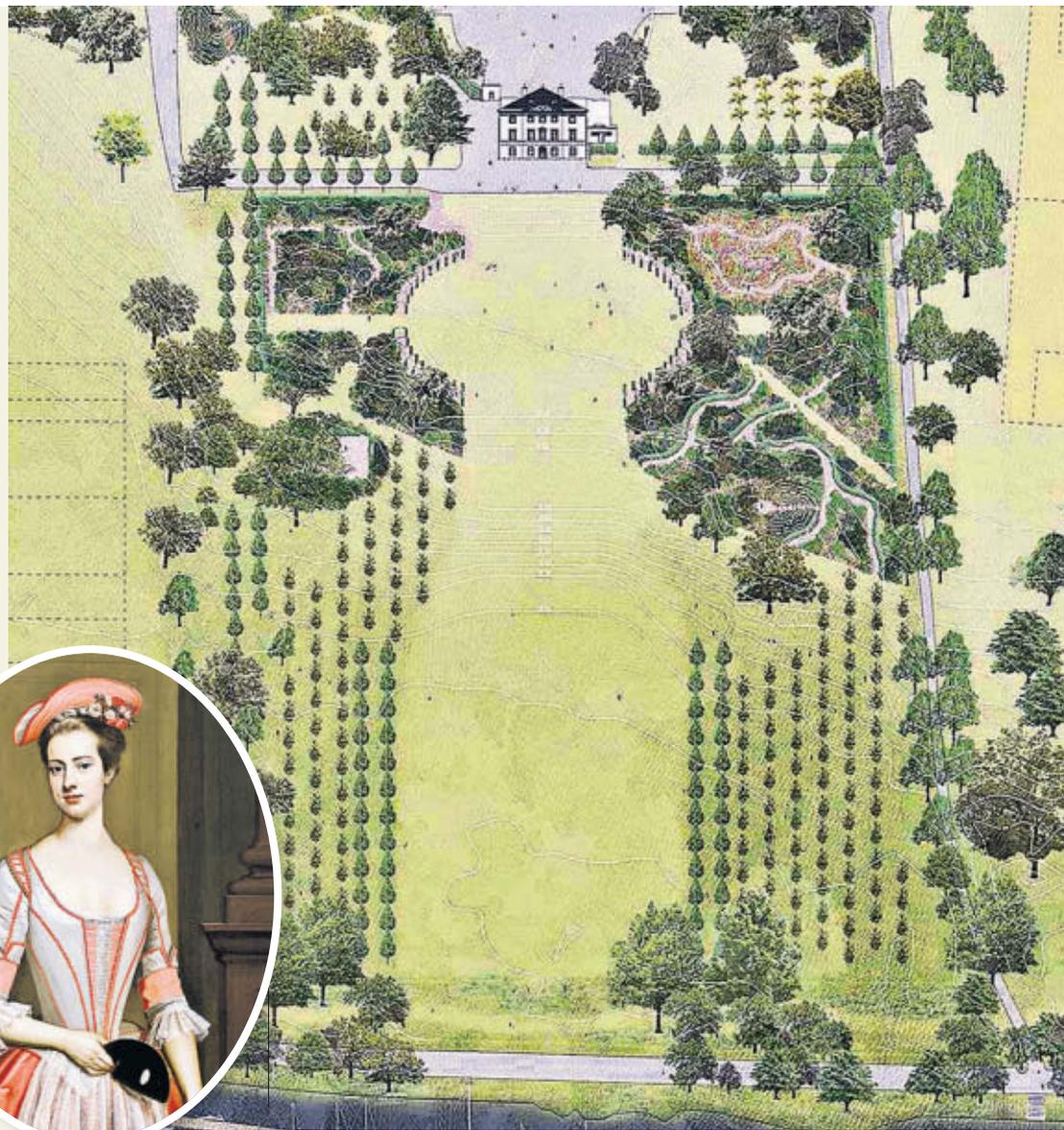
Khola Hasan, a scholar at the Islamic Sharia Council in London, said: “Triple talaq is really common among the

Asian community in Britain,” adding that her council deems it invalid.

“The most common scenario is when the husband screams *talaq* three times in a fit of anger and then regrets it. His family will say the divorce is valid; we advise they have three months in which to make a decision.”

Aina Khan, a solicitor at Duncan Lewis, said the Marriage Act was “not fit for purpose in today's society”. Her campaign, Register Our Marriage, calls for an update so that “all faiths must register their religious ceremonies”.

Supreme Court judges in India are examining whether triple talaq is a cultural, rather than religious, practice, which could lead to it being outlawed.



PAWEŁ LIBERA/GETTY IMAGES

An 18th-century view of the ornate landscape at Marble Hill House, which was built for Henrietta Howard. The Palladian villa features superb interiors

A £4.5m makeover for royal love nest

English Heritage is accused of planning the Disneyfication of one of England's best Palladian villas (Sean O'Neill writes).

The charity's project to revive the 18th century Marble Hill House and park, built for George II's mistress, Henrietta Howard, in Twickenham, southwest London, is attracting strong local opposition.

The scheme, to be funded by £4.5 million of lottery money, proposes restoring the house and recreating a landscaped

garden of 1752, including a bowling alley, on a sweep of park leading down to the Thames. It also proposes a “vibrant” café, gift shop and “themed children's play area”.

English Heritage is battling financial problems. It has a target of becoming independent of government by 2023, but recorded a £4.8 million operating loss last



year. It says Marble Hill, which loses £280,000 a year, has become an “unsustainable financial burden”.

The application says Marble Hill will never operate at a profit although there is “the potential to make [it] less of a financial burden ... by increasing access and ensuring that the commercial opportunities within the park are maximised”.

The planning statement omits the £75,000 which English Heritage receives from the House Festival, headlined last year by Kylie Minogue. The plan for a park that has been open to the public since 1903 has alarmed locals.

One objection says: “The application seems to be aimed at creating ... a theme park. Repair beautiful Marble Hill House, but think again about Disneyfication.”

“It couldn't be further from Disney,” said Anna Eavis, curatorial director. “If anyone comes expecting Disneyfication they [will be] disappointed.”

Harry Potter and the theft of the handwritten prequel

Valentine Low

An untitled Harry Potter short story handwritten on a postcard by JK Rowling has been stolen in a burglary.

The “extremely valuable” 800-word prequel was written on both sides of the card for a charity auction nine years ago and sold for £25,000 at Sotheby's.

Reportedly set three years before Harry Potter's birth, it features James, his father, and his godfather Sirius Black when they were teenagers. They are confronted by two “muggle” policemen after a motorcycle chase but manage to escape on broomsticks.

The manuscript and a quantity of jewellery were stolen from a property in Kings Heath, Birmingham, between

April 13 and 24. West Midlands police have appealed for information in the hope that the request “goes far and wide among Harry Potter fans throughout the world”. PC Paul Jauncey said: “The only people who will buy this unique piece are true Harry Potter fans. We appeal to anyone who sees, or is offered this item for sale, to contact police.”

The manuscript was among several works donated by authors, including Sebastian Faulks and Doris Lessing, to an auction held in 2008 to raise funds for English PEN, which promotes understanding through literature, and Dyslexia Action.

Anyone with information is asked to contact West Midlands police on 101 or Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

Stalker pretended he worked for MI6

A former policeman was so desperate to get his ex-girlfriend back that he hired an actress to go to her house and pretend he was a spy like James Bond.

David Fisher said he was “stupid, strange and desperate” in his attempts to make his former partner meet up with him, but denied in a trial at Sevenoaks magistrates' court that his actions — including paying the actress to tell her he worked for MI6 — amounted to stalking.

Although his ex-girlfriend said that Fisher, 29, was “very kind”, the couple broke up in October last year after returning from holiday in Greece, where they had a number of arguments.

While she was away, her family researched Fisher's background and found that he was not, as he had told her, a store manager at Sainsbury's in Epsom, Surrey. After conducting her

own research, the woman, from Tunbridge Wells, Kent, found out that he actually worked for B&M stores and she called off the relationship.

Fisher, from Epsom, persistently tried to contact her, sending her daily



David Fisher lied about his job to his ex-girlfriend

emails and calling her up to 50 times in one week.

The woman said that the pair went for their first date after speaking on the dating website match.com in March last year. In December, Fisher — who was suspended from Surrey police after

committing a string of driving offences — employed Hannah Jackson, an actress, to tell his ex-girlfriend he was an MI6 agent.

The complainant said: “I got a call from someone who said they needed to come to my house and read me a disclosure report regarding an officer who I had been in a relationship with. I knew David had been a police officer at some stage so I decided to ring 101 and check.”

The police said Fisher's name was not on their records so they attended the woman's home the next day, where they answered the door to Hannah Jackson.

Nick Benstead-Smith, chairman of the bench, told Fisher: “You caused distress with your actions and we regard this as unreasonable.” Fisher was found guilty of harassment by way of stalking after the day-long trial on May 4. He will be sentenced on Wednesday.