

Controlling Body and Sexuality: Cross Border Marriages Among Muslim Women in Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has facilitated increased mobility for purposes such as education, employment, and leisure, resulting in a rise in cross-border marriages. Existing literature predominantly focuses on unions formed between individuals who have prior familiarity with each other. Typically, such marriages involve individuals who are educated, employed, and financially independent, often belonging to the upper-middle or upper socioeconomic strata. In these unions, there is usually an aspiration towards fostering relationships based on equality. However, this study diverges from the conventional narrative by examining "commercially arranged" cross-border marriages. Such marriages entail unions between individuals from disparate geographical, national, educational, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, this research employs a case study approach and gathers data through interviews with 67 Kerala Muslim women who have experienced various forms of cross-border marriages. Among these cases, 46 involve grooms from Mysore (Karnataka state), 18 from Arab countries (UAE, Kuwait, Iran, Saudi Arabia), and three from the Maldives, encompassing both inter-state and international marriages. The study seeks to elucidate the social and economic drivers behind such marriages and their subsequent impact on women's lives from perspectives rooted in bio-politics, gender justice, and human rights. It delves into the complexities of multiple marginalities resulting from the intersection of poverty and gender to deepen our understanding of the social construction of womanhood within the context of cross-border marriages. Notably, marriages often serve as arenas for extreme forms of sexual violence and expressions of male dominance, necessitating an examination from a bio-political standpoint

Key Words: Cross Border Marriages, Dowry, Language, Muslim Women, Sexual and Gender dimensions, Bio-politics

Introduction

When compared to any other state in India, Kerala is renowned for its low fertility and mortality rates, as well as its high mean age at marriage for females, impressive educational achievements among women, and elevated levels of female literacy and status. Despite these progressive indicators, the condition of women from marginalized backgrounds remains deplorable.

Marriage is universally perceived as a means of "settling in," even though women from disadvantaged sections often enter this stage of life with hopes of well-being and happiness. However, such aspirations are often dashed in the case of cross-border marriages in Kerala, commonly referred to by the media as "Arabi Kalyanam" (Arab Marriages), "Mali Kalyanam" (Mali Marriages), or "Mysore Kalyanam" (Mysore Marriages).

The prevailing global norm in cross-border marriages typically involves unions between individuals with university education, usually hailing from middle- and upper-class families (Kaur 2004). This pattern is also observed among the elite in Kerala (Cottrell 1990).

However, this study diverges from this trend by focusing on cross-border marriages in Kerala involving individuals with lower levels of education, belonging to socially and economically deprived segments of society, where couples often have no familiarity with each other, to the extent that they do not even share a common language.

Kerala is known for its "export of brides" to states with skewed female sex ratios, such as Tamil Nadu, Haryana, Gujarat, and Karnataka states (Srinivasan and Rajan 2015). These marriages, named after the groom's place of origin, were prevalent in the Malabar region, Kollam district, and Thiruvananthapuram, particularly in the past decade.

This study examines cross-border marriages among the Muslim community in Kerala from a bio-political, genderjustice, and human rights perspective, focusing on various stages of the marriage process, from groom selection or arrangement to life after marriage. The study elucidates the social and economic factors influencing lower-middle and lower-class Muslims in Kerala, shedding light on the structural constraints within which brides and their families navigate groom selection and dowry negotiation.

By analyzing the narratives of 67 women survivors of such marriages, the study exposes the multiple marginalities faced by them, which render them voiceless and powerless in the negotiation process, constrained by poverty, gender, language, and cultural context. This examination enhances our understanding of the social construction of womanhood within the context of cross-border marriages, where women are often reduced to mere biological bodies, transplanted into unfamiliar social, linguistic, and cultural environments as wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers.

Methodology

The adoption of a qualitative methodology, characterized by the utilization of a case study approach and the incorporation of interview schedules, guides, and narratives, enables a thorough exploration of the experiences of 67 Kerala Muslim women who have endured various cross-border marriages. This sample encompasses survivors from diverse geographical backgrounds, with grooms originating from Mysore, Arab countries (UAE, Kuwait, Iran, Saudi Arabia), and the Maldives. Such diversity allows for an examination of the nuanced differences in experiences stemming from the cultural, social, and economic contexts of these marriages.

The inclusion of women spanning a broad age range, ranging from 25 to 75 years old, provides insights into the enduring impact of cross-border marriages on survivors and reveals variations in experiences across different life stages.

Employing qualitative methodologies, such as interviews and narratives, facilitates an exploration of the lived experiences, perspectives, and voices of the survivors, enabling a nuanced analysis of the social, economic, and cultural dynamics inherent in cross-border marriages. This approach allows for the uncovering of complexities within these marital relationships, including issues on agency, power dynamics, gender roles, and instances of exploitation and abuse.

Purposive sampling was selected to ensure the inclusion of individuals most relevant to the research question, thereby enabling the author to address the specific objectives and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies surrounding cross-border marriages among Kerala Muslim women.

Overall, the study's methodology facilitates a deep exploration of the multifaceted experiences of Kerala Muslim women who have survived cross-border marriages, shedding light on the unique challenges and complexities they face within these marital relationships and contributing to a broader understanding of the intersections of gender, culture, and globalization.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting the research presented in this paper, the author adhered to rigorous ethical standards to protect participants' rights and confidentiality. The following ethical considerations were observed:

Informed Consent: Before their involvement in the study, all participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about the purpose of the study. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point in time without penalty.

Anonymity: To protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants, all identifying information, including names, personal details, and any potentially identifiable characteristics, has been anonymized. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym to replace their real name throughout the paper.

Drivers of Cross-Border Marriages

The study observed that in Kerala these types of commercially arranged cross-border marriages the key drivers are, family honor, the preponderance of daughters, societal pressures, poverty, and the entrenched dowry system play pivotal roles.

Family Honor

In Indian society, women are often perceived as guardians of cultural traditions, and their actions are subjected to scrutiny within a patriarchal framework. Upon reaching marriageable age, women encounter sustained scrutiny not only from immediate family members but also from wider societal norms. The topic of romance, particularly concerning daughters, remains a taboo subject, with decisions regarding marriage—such as partner selection and age—typically dictated by elder male figures within the family.

Parents, compelled by societal pressures to adhere to established norms and uphold familial reputation, commonly prioritize considerations of caste and religion over compatibility when arranging marriages for their daughters.

This emphasis on societal image frequently results in a compromise of their daughters' happiness and overall well-being.

In this study, parents of survivors revealed a desire to regulate and control their daughters' sexuality. Concerns arose over the potential tarnishing of family honor should their daughters engage in relationships outside of prescribed societal norms, leading to fears of social ostracization. Consequently, in a bid to safeguard family honor and regulate female sexuality, parents were often willing to marry their daughters to individuals from unfamiliar backgrounds, without conducting thorough background checks.

Another significant contributing factor to these cross-border marriages is the preponderance of daughters. Participants hail from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with each family having at least one female sibling. Arranging a marriage for one daughter poses a formidable challenge for these families, as they are required to provide multiple dowries. Moreover, the exorbitant dowry demands from local suitors often exceed the families' financial means, making it impossible to meet such expectations. To safeguard their family's honor, alleviate societal pressure, and facilitate the marriages of their other daughters, the parents of the participants resorted to arranging these marriages forcefully.

Dowry

In this study two distinct economic transactions are observed: the payment of Mehr or bride price, and the provision of dowry. In inter-state marriages, such as those occurring in Mysore marriages, dowry serves as the economic transaction, whereas bride price is prevalent in marriages with grooms from the Arab and Mali regions. The bestowal of dowry is viewed as a means of ensuring the future security of the daughter, fulfilling parental obligations towards her, and facilitating her successful transition into married life. Parents often seek to alleviate their responsibilities towards one daughter to attend to the needs of other daughters, if any exist.

Escalating dowry demands from local grooms in Kerala compel parents of daughters to seek prospective grooms from outside the state who may require lesser or no dowry. During the "Gulf boom" in Kerala, local men migrated to Gulf countries and achieved financial stability. Upon their return, they sought younger brides, often characterized as "beautiful," prompting parents to offer substantial dowries despite the high demands. Consequently, the inflated dowry rates demanded by Gulf-settled Malayali grooms for younger brides exert upward pressure on dowry expectations for older women, posing challenges for parents seeking suitable matches for their older daughters in the marriage market.

To circumvent these challenges, parents often explore options beyond their localities, such as Mysore and nearby states with the assistance of marriage brokers who facilitate arrangements by promising minimal or no dowry requirements, particularly in regions with low female sex ratios, as documented in the Mahila Samkhya Report of 2013. Marriage brokers play a pivotal role in orchestrating these cross-border marriages. The parents of these women readily accepted the assertions made by these brokers regarding the prospective bridegrooms, without conducting any background verification. They proceeded to arrange their daughters' marriages to these individuals from unfamiliar territories. A significant proportion of the participants in this study have multiple sisters, and the prevalence of daughters is one of the primary motivations behind the parents' decision to arrange their daughters' marriages in such cross-border arrangements. The increased number of daughters translates to higher dowry obligations, particularly for families from lower economic backgrounds. Consequently, arranging for dowry becomes exceedingly challenging for parents with multiple female children. Women in this study were found to be of low educational background and their parents were of low financial background. Hence, any scope for waiting for the 'right groom' or seeking alliances from like-minded men was a luxury for their parents could not afford. Parents, grooms, and brokers during the negotiation of dowry mark them with only phallic value (Irigaray 1985) and negotiate the price at which they will settle for dowry. The voice of the bride is silenced. The woman is essentially, reduced

to her age, physical appearance, and virginity while naming a price for the same

Mehr/Bride Price

The social dynamics surrounding Arab and Mali marriages are intricately linked with economic considerations. Unlike dowry, these marriages involve the payment of Mehr or bride price. However, due to financial constraints and low socio-economic status, the parents of these women often struggle to arrange their daughters' marriages. Arab and Mali men visiting Kerala for trade, medical treatment, or leisure purposes target young and attractive girls during their short stays in the region. Marriage brokers also play a significant role in facilitating these arrangements, often persuading the parents of the survivors to agree to the marriages. Arab and Mali men typically provide a substantial amount of money as Mehr, which helps alleviate the financial burdens of the women's families. This infusion of funds enables the families to escape poverty, settle their debts, and arrange marriages for other daughters within their community. In many cases, these women become sacrificial figures for the betterment of their families. While these marriages may be perceived as a means to escape chronic poverty and long-term reliance on welfare, they also highlight the complex interplay between economic necessity and social pressure faced by these women and their families (Kaur 2010).

The social and economic drivers mix to form a very tight situation for women and their families from impoverished Muslim backgrounds as they approach marriageable age. The approach to marriage is hurried and families are put in a situation where they are forced to negotiate on dowry, bride price, etc., as if the bride is an 'object' or 'commodity'. "For woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men, in other words, a commodity. As such, she remains the guardian of material substance, whose price will be established, in terms of the standard of their work and their need/desire, by "subjects": workers, merchants, and consumers" (Irigaray 1985).

Objectification and Commodification

Objectification from parents and well-wishers of the bride is evident in the rush to marry off the woman even if there are language differences between the groom and bride. Grooms from Arabia and Maldives select their spouse according to their physical appearance and age to satisfy their sexual desire without any value for their intelligence and knowledge. Theoretically one calls this sexist way of valuing women using the male gaze to objectify women. This objectification can be understood by King (2004) who explained the underpinning power element between men and women in our society. He argued that man is a culture/ mind i.e., the rational, unified, thinking subject capable of controlling the woman/mind/ irrational/ emotional or instinct-driven by using knowledge and willpower. The narratives from women survivors are evidence of the techniques of willpower that men and other agents of male power namely parents, well-wishers, in-laws, etc., use in subjugating women to the patriarchal system in society.

King (2004) explains the social construction of women as an object is run by instinct which needs a man to control

them. This cultural stereotyping of a woman as a sexual being whose chastity has to be protected by her father and sexual rights over her transacted upon by the husband by paying Mehr or bride price. This tradition shows the patriarchy underpinning the marriage as an institution where the woman's only purpose is to serve as a sexual being a mere biological body as Agamben (2000) mentioned. Likewise catering to mere basic needs of food and water and arranging for her ablutions is considered relevant in her conjugal life and her husband. The needs and freedoms of a woman as a wife or daughter-in-law or as a social being are controlled and ignored making use of a lack of language and unfamiliarity with the country and neighborhood.

Objectification and commodification of women may be evidenced by the narratives of women in this study.

'When my parents were searching for a groom within our community, no suitable match was found for me due to societal norms regarding age. Despite being only 20 years old, I was considered socially "overage." Local grooms demanded exorbitant dowries, which my parents were unable to afford.

Despite being aware of the challenges associated with marriages in Mysore, my parents agreed to a proposal from there. Reluctant to marry a stranger, I acquiesced under familial pressure. We were able to negotiate a lower dowry amount, but the decision was made primarily due to the urgency of finding a match, compounded by the fact that I have two younger sisters who are only two years younger than me' (Safiya, Mysore marriage Survivor)

Another Narrative;

'I am the second daughter among my four siblings, all of whom are girls. Unlike my elder sister, I am fair-skinned and considered beautiful. However, my parents faced immense difficulty arranging a marriage for

my elder sister due to societal biases against her dark complexion. Despite numerous proposals, grooms demanded hefty dowries that my parents could not afford.

One day, a marriage broker approached my father with news of an Arab man seeking a bride. Initially, my father agreed to arrange my elder sister's marriage with the Arab man. However, the broker insisted that I would be a moresuitable match. At the time, I was just 15 years old. The broker promised a generous Mehr, prompting my parents to view this as an opportunity to alleviate our family's poverty and arrange my sister's marriage within the offered amount.

Ultimately, I became the scapegoat for the betterment of my family, as my parents opted to marry me off to the Arab man in pursuit of financial stability and to secure my sister's marriage." (Mehek, 45, Arab Marriage Survivor)

These women were subjected to dual treatment as both a liability and a commodity by their immediate relatives. The prevalence of the dowry system led to these women being viewed as burdens on their families, prompting their exchange for monetary compensation under the guise of bride price or Mehr, particularly in Arab and Mali marriages. Women's bodies were regarded as commodities to be traded in exchange for favors or financial gain. Shockingly, some women in Arab marriages were married multiple times to secure higher mehr or bride price, highlighting the alarming commodification of women's bodies.

The fact that five women in this study reported being married multiple times to obtain a higher bride price underscores the troubling extent of this practice. Such practices reduce women to mere objects, exchanged for material benefits or social standing, thereby perpetuating harmful gender dynamics and reinforcing power imbalances within marital relationships.

The concept of mehr in Islamic marriages is intended to provide financial security to the bride and signify the groom's commitment to support her. However, when this financial transaction becomes the primary focus, it can lead to the exploitation and objectification of women.

The Narrative below shows the level of objectification where the husband is a consumer of porn movies that commodify women's bodies. He forces his partner into acting out those acts. To bring his fantasies to life he found a sex slave in his wife who if found disobedient was punished physically. This survivor had to take psychiatric medicines after the trauma of forced sex, cursing during the act, and severe beating for not complying.

"My former husband would watch pornographic movies and pressure me to imitate the scenes depicted. This experience left me traumatized and plunged me into depression, especially considering my young age at the time. When he sought sexual intercourse, I recoiled in horror and screamed. He then forcibly compelled me to enact the violent sexual acts he had witnessed in those videos. When I refused to comply with his demands, he subjected me to brutal physical violence." - (Ramlath, 42, Survivor of a Mysore Marriage)

The theme of consent and marital rape is alien to these marriages and such rights of women are unknown to the women and their relatives themselves who send her into this hell.

"My sexual experiences with my Arab husband were incredibly painful. There were days when he would initiate sex multiple times, sometimes as many as 5 or 6 times a day. At that time, I was too young to fully comprehend what was happening, but I knew that my entire body was in agony." - (Ummukulsu, 58, Survivor of an Arab Marriage) Furthermore, the notion of women's bodies being treated as commodities extends beyond marriage and can manifest in various forms of exploitation and abuse, including trafficking, forced labor, and sexual violence. This objectification not only diminishes women's autonomy and agency but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes and contributes to the normalization of gender-based violence.

Dowry Violence in Cross-Border Marriages

The majority of survivors from Mysore marriages recounted instances of dowry-related violence that occurred within their husband's households.

The patriarchal structure of society acts upon the agency of the women belonging to socio-economic backward sections where neither is she educated nor her parents capable of being able to cater to the needs of divorce and a divorcee daughter. The woman is often not financially independent. As such, their mobility, and decision-making in the marital family remain limited. She remains trapped here and often becomes an instrument in the hands of in-laws to demand dowry. Besides these narratives below are an expression of agency constrained by human resources i.e., those significant others formed from marriage reducing the pregnant woman to bare life- using domestic violence, not even providing food to her so that she surrenders to giving more dowry, negating her voice asking her mother to stop from paying dowry.

"As they (in-laws) demanded more money from my mother, it became apparent that I was seen as the easiest

source of income without the need for any effort or employment. In the hope of securing a better life for me, my mother complied with their demands for money, initially providing Rs. 50,000 followed by an additional Rs. 25,000. Concerned for my well-being, I reached out to my mother and pleaded with her to cease giving them any further funds.

However, when my sister-in-law discovered my actions, she resorted to extreme measures, depriving me of food for days on end, despite my pregnancy at the time. Left with no other options, I resorted to desperate measures for survival, stealing and consuming the scraps meant for the goats. For an entire week, I endured this harrowing ordeal, struggling to sustain myself amidst their cruelty and neglect”- (Amina 43, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

Jaseena’s experience;

As time passed, my father-in-law began pressuring me to solicit money from my family. Refusing to comply with his demands, I faced further mistreatment alongside my child. Denied food for several days, I struggled to nurse my child adequately, leading to her cries of hunger. In a fit of rage, my father-in-law callously hurled my six-month-old child against the wall, leaving her with severe injuries. Overcome with panic and distress, I cried out for help, prompting concerned neighbors to rush my child to the hospital. With the assistance of compassionate neighbors, I returned to my parental home and took legal action against my husband and his father for their heinous actions.” - (Jaseena 44, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

Haifath says:

“During a period when my mother-in-law was hospitalized, my husband demanded additional money from my family. To meet his request, I surrendered all my gold sovereigns to cover the hospital expenses. Despite the strain on my family's finances, I refrained from seeking further assistance from them.

Unfortunately, my decision angered my husband, leading to escalated mistreatment upon my mother-in-law's discharge from the hospital. In a fit of rage, he violently assaulted me with a wooden log, inflicting severe injuries to my face. Shockingly, my mother-in-law sided with him, exacerbating the ordeal. As a result of the brutal attack, I lost some of my front teeth and experienced a partial loss of eyesight in my left eye” - (Haifath 34, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

The material resources open to a woman of Mysore cross-border marriage would ordinarily be pocket money from her husband which is the case for most of the women in this study. It could also be the stock of wealth given as dowry by parents. Note that when the wife’s mobility and her other freedoms are restricted, the power of access to dowry and determining the use of it will be under the husband and in-laws. One narrative is illustrative

“My family had provided a substantial dowry for our marriage, which my in-laws and husband saw as an opportunity to extort money from me through torture. They frequently demanded money from my parents, and when I refused, they subjected me to severe mistreatment, withholding food for days on end. After realizing that my family would not capitulate to their demands, they pressured me into seeking a divorce.

Despite vehemently opposing their ultimatum due to my parents' dire financial circumstances and the welfare of my child, my protests fell on deaf ears. One day, while I was breastfeeding my child, my mother-in-law doused me in kerosene and set us both on fire. In a desperate bid for survival, I managed to flee, but not before sustaining significant burns, particularly on my back. Miraculously, my child escaped unharmed from the ordeal. We sought justice by filing a case against my in-laws, but they managed to evade capture and accountability, leaving us to grapple with the physical and emotional scars of their heinous actions.- (Nabeesa 30, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

The stories depict a pattern of economic exploitation, where women are seen as sources of income or labor by their in-laws. The pressure to provide dowry, even at the expense of the woman's well-being, reflects deeply entrenched gender norms and expectations that prioritize male entitlement and control over women's bodies and resources.

Furthermore, the narratives reveal the intersections of gender-based violence and economic coercion, where women are subjected to verbal abuse, physical violence, and deprivation as a means of asserting control and dominance over them. The lack of support from husbands and in-laws exacerbates the vulnerability of these women, leaving them isolated and defenseless against mistreatment.

The restrictions on mobility and communication imposed on some survivors further highlight how patriarchal structures limit women's autonomy and agency, rendering them voiceless and powerless in their own lives. The language barrier faced by survivors adds a layer of complexity, making it even more challenging for them to assert their rights and advocate for themselves.

Language Barriers in Cross-Border Marriages

Role of language as a crucial barrier in curbing the agency of the woman and her natal family and in reducing

herto what Agamben calls 'bare life'. In any marriage, the role of interpersonal communication is of utmost importance in preserving the relationship (Nartey 2014; Lavner et.al 2016; Renalds 2011) and experiencing marital satisfaction Rosen - Grandon et al. (2004). If there is a lack of effective communication there is bound to be conflict in the marriage (Frame 2004, Tien 2013). To maintain a family relationship both parties should make an effort to build and nurture a relationship for the individuality of both to develop and also to support each other. The role of non-verbal communication is also important but not over and above verbal communication in a common language (Fitzpatrick 1988). But in this type of marriage, there is no common language spoken between the couples. In this case, the role of language as a constraint upon women's agency is important.

Marriage is a relationship that will go through challenges and evolve more so in cross-border or inter-cultural marriages. Cools (2006) has established eight significant areas wherein intercultural marriages have particular challenges, they are language, communication, adapting spouses, and friends, raising children, gender roles, visibility, and traditions. Cross-border marriages though inter-cultural are, as per the viewpoint of this study, dysfunctional marriages where female partner is abused, exploited, and robbed of dignity and human rights. Hence such marriages can't be seen in the context that Cools (2006) has seen inter-cultural marriages. There was scope for pre-marital familiarity through circumstances of meeting through dating apps, co-education, shared workplace, etc. However, in this study, all these cross-border marriages are arranged by elder members of the family with no scope for familiarity. Thus, the context of this study is very different.

In this study, a mere two out of the 67 women reported that their former husbands had some knowledge of Malayalam before marriage, likely acquired from working in Kerala. Consequently, communication with these former husbands was relatively less challenging compared to the experiences of other survivors. However, despite this limited proficiency in the local language, the participants still encountered communication difficulties with their in-laws due to linguistic disparities.

Across the board, all survivors in the study expressed significant struggles in communicating with both their husbands and in-laws, primarily attributable to differences in language.

The issue of the language barrier emerged from the outset of these alliances, with brokers assuming a significant role in mediating communication between the families of the bride and groom. The unquestioning trust bestowed upon brokers by the brides' families serves as the primary catalyst for language-related challenges in these marriages.

The language barrier poses a more significant challenge for women who have survived Arab or Mali marriages, as access to Malayali neighbors, who could potentially aid in communication, is null or limited compared to Mysore marriages, where some level of interaction with neighbors is feasible. From a sociological standpoint, cultural disparities, encompassing differences in food, customs, traditions, and norms, exacerbate the challenges stemming from language differences.

In marital relationships, emotional fulfillment is vital for both partners, often achieved through supportive communication. However, in the case of these cross-border marriages where couples lack a common language, resolving marital issues becomes challenging, hindering the establishment of a strong bond between them. The inability to engage in meaningful conversations with their husbands and in-laws renders these marriages more akin to oppressive institutions characterized by dowry demands, coerced sexual relations, and unequal distribution of household responsibilities. This sentiment is succinctly articulated by women survivors.

"I oppose the concept of cross-border marriages, particularly due to my personal experience. Driven by our dire financial circumstances, I reluctantly consented to such a marriage. It's unimaginable for any woman to willingly marry an elderly individual from a foreign land, especially when there's a significant language barrier. Throughout my marriage, I attempted to communicate with my husband using sign language, but unfortunately, it proved to be ineffective and inadequate. The inability to effectively communicate compounded the challenges I faced in my marital life." - (Laila 51, Arab Marriage Survivor).

"There were moments when I found solace in not understanding my in-laws' language. It shielded me from the pain of comprehending their scoldings or verbal abuse directed towards me. Peculiarly, ignorance of their language offered me a form of protection from their hurtful words and criticisms. - (Faseela 30, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

We can see from the narratives of the women survivors of cross-border marriages the lack of intimacy, support, or understanding in terms of making her comfortable in terms of language and cultural differences from the spouse's side or in-laws after marriage. Grooms know nothing of the wife's language and vice versa which is fundamental to success in marriage (Lavner et.al 2016; Nartey 2014). The reduction of marriage to mere production of children with a person with whom there is no connection especially when there is no similarity of language of speech. This is an example of treating a woman as a mere object. The relatives on the side of the women themselves suffer from a patriarchal mindset and treat the woman's political voice when

she is asking elders or other experienced relatives about her genuine fear of intimacy, she is treated yet again as 'bare life'. (see narrative below)

"When I was presented with a Mysore marriage proposal, my primary concern revolved around communication with my prospective husband, as he did not speak Malayalam and I was unfamiliar with his language. Upon sharing this apprehension with my female relatives, their response was dismissive, asserting that the language barrier posed no obstacle to conceiving a child. Their teasing remarks elicited laughter from everyone present, yet I found myself unable to join in their amusement (Shareefa 42, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

"Upon arriving in my Iranian husband's hometown, I soon discovered the shocking truth - he was already married and had six children from his previous relationship. To make matters worse, his wife and children subjected me to mistreatment, relegating me to the status of a servant in their household. Hindered by the language barrier, I found myself unable to confide in anyone, not even my husband, about the challenges and hardships I faced. Compounding my isolation was the absence of fellow Indians in my husband's community, leaving me feeling utterly trapped in a hostile environment". - (Ruqiya 53, Arab Marriage Survivor).

A significant factor contributing to the prevalence of violence in these marriages is the language barrier. Communication breakdowns due to the lack of a shared language exacerbate existing tensions and misunderstandings between both parties. This linguistic divide often leads to heightened frustrations, and difficulties in expressing concerns or seeking help, further perpetuating the cycle of violence within these marriages

Human Trafficking for Prostitution in Cross-Border Marriages

Various literature (Duong et al. 2007) have already mentioned human trafficking in cross-border marriages. Human trafficking is the illegal movement of human beings with the purpose of exploitation of any kind. Here women are exploited physically, mentally, and sexually.

Research on human trafficking associated with cross-border marriages in the Kerala region is scanty. But "work by anti-trafficking NGOs in North India has singularly chosen to highlight trafficking and sexual slavery concerns about women in these cross-region marriages" (Pandey and Kant 2003). The women 'sold' as 'brides' are being used as domestic workers and they are sexually abused by their husbands. Then they are resold to other traffickers. Understanding the mafia of trafficking women in the name of marriage is very narrow, especially in the academic context.

Personal experiences of women are narrated below:

"One night, three of my former husband's friends came over and began drinking at our place. I was breastfeeding my child in the room when suddenly two of them barged in and demanded that I breastfeed them. Shocked and horrified, I yelled at them to leave, but they forcibly restrained me, gagged me, and raped me. My child lay sleeping beside me, unaware of the horror unfolding. My husband, inebriated and unaware, was not present during the assault.

When he regained consciousness, I confided in him about the ordeal, hoping for support and protection. To my dismay, he callously revealed that he had accepted money from them, implying that I was obligated to satisfy their desires. The abuse continued in the following days, with me being subjected to further assaults while under their surveillance. My husband, complicit in my suffering, threatened to harm my child if I dared to speak out.

Terrified and isolated, I suffered in silence, unable to confide in anyone. Eventually, I managed to escape with my child, consumed by fear and trauma. For months, I remained silent, unable to articulate the horrors I had endured. Even when taken to a psychiatrist by my family, I could not bring myself to disclose the truth.

It took months of struggle to recover from the trauma, during which I remained silent even to my mother. When I finally regained my composure, my mother urged me to return, unaware of the extent of my suffering. Reluctantly, I revealed everything to her, pleading with her to keep it secret. To this day, she honors that promise. Ultimately, I found the strength to divorce my husband through a legal process called fasq, freeing myself from the torment and oppression I endured in that abusive marriage"- (Afsath 37, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

("Fasq," which is a concept in Islamic law about a woman's right to initiate divorce, is known as "Khula." Fasq allows a Muslim woman to seek dissolution of her marriage through a legal process in which she forfeits her dowry or any other financial entitlements from her husband in exchange for a divorce. This process typically involves a judicial or religious authority and is subject to certain conditions and considerations outlined in Islamic jurisprudence)

Another participant narrates her experience of the same nature as below;

"Just one week after our marriage, my husband took me to a lodge where two men awaited us. They handed

money to my husband, and I was subjected to horrific acts of rape by them. Night after night, I endured repeated assaults by different men. It wasn't long before I discovered the horrifying truth about my husband - he was a 'pimp'. He had trafficked numerous girls under the guise of marriage and sold them into prostitution, myself included. Shockingly, this exploitation continued even during my pregnancy.

The individuals who attended our wedding posing as relatives were all part of this elaborate deception, none of them were truly related to my husband. The broker who arranged our alliance deceived us, taking money from my husband and lying to us about the circumstances. Threatened with dire consequences if I dared to speak out, my husband manipulated me into silence by threatening harm to my younger sisters.

Despite the facade of a loving and caring husband that he presented to my family, the truth of my life with him remained hidden from them for a year. Eventually, my husband's criminal activities caught up with him, and he was apprehended by the police in an unrelated case. Seizing the opportunity, I managed to escape from that nightmarish existence and subsequently divorced him through legal proceedings". (Subaida 35, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

Survivors of these marriages often endure imprisonment, physical violence, sexual assault, and emotional manipulation at the hands of their husbands. These tactics are employed to break their spirits, subject them to humiliation, and essentially coerce them into sex work. In instances of refusal, survivors are subjected to severe beatings, starvation, or threats of harm to their children or female siblings. Constant surveillance and intimidation by their husbands serve to control women's movements and reinforce their subordination. Fearful of the repercussions, women are hesitant to return to their families of origin.

Furthermore, survivors reveal that others have been trafficked from different states under the guise of marriage, although they managed to escape such situations. Despite their escape, they continue to grapple with the trauma of their past experiences. One participant, now married to a local man, remains distressed, and uncertain about the paternity of her child conceived during her previous marriage. She lives in fear that her past experiences will one day come to light, further complicating her present circumstances.

Control of Body: Violence and Confinement in Marital Home

Society controls the body of the woman right from the time she is raised in her natal home where the concern is to keep her virginity guarded. As Mukherjee (2013) states, "Her choice and agency in both her natal place as well as her marital place are under serious constraints as far as any decision regarding marriage is concerned". In our society after marriage woman is expected to move into her husband's house (patrilocal) and consider his house as her own and should live her entire life over there. In this place as well, there are constraints as well especially due to language and differences in geographic-socio-cultural context and there is also the control element in the form of the husband.

The constraints become tighter and the agency of the woman becomes lesser, as some scholars (Dyson and Moore 1983), point out that between a woman's natal family and marital family increases. About the agency, Kabeer (1999) says that there is a relationship between resource, agency, and achievement. She added that "resources are a precondition that enhances a person's ability to exercise agency and achieve a desired outcome. Resources include material, human, and social resources which enhance the ability to make choices. Agency is the ability to set goals and achieve them".

In this study, we shall see the nature of resources available to women from these Arab or Mali marriages where natal homes are far away. In this study except for a few Arab marriage survivors, all the other survivors of Mysore and Mali marriage moved into their husbands' places after their marriage. As mentioned above the natal family remained in Kerala and the Malayali survivors could not contact them in time of need constraining their agency. Out of 18 Arab marriage survivors, only four women lived in their husbands' place for a short period. But all the women who lived in their husbands' places shared experiences regarding their distressful life over there.

As already shown earlier, often these marriages compromise the dignity of women or are another manifestation of human trafficking. From the gender perspective and human rights angle, biopolitics angle these marriages are dysfunctional leading to the destruction of the freedom and dignity of an individual by enforcing control over the body of the women often by punishing and confining them. In the following paragraphs, we will also bring out the lack of agency that the women in cross-border marriages felt because they could not speak their husband's language. All except two cases the grooms had worked in Kerala briefly and knew the language a little bit, else all the women interviewed faced grave issues due to lack of communication.

The husband's nature or their mentality toward the women was hardly enquired about or assessed in negotiations of marriage so most women got into difficult situations far away in their marital homes.

“Following our marriage, my husband took me to Iran. Gradually, I came to realize that my husband harbored deep suspicions about me, a condition that seemed to afflict him. He relocated me to various residences, where he frequently confined me to locked rooms whenever he ventured outside. For a harrowing period of five years, I endured a state of house arrest in Iran. Throughout this time, I was utterly cut off from communication with my family. They lacked any means to reach me as they were unaware of my husband's address. In truth, I had no contact with anyone besides my husband during those years. He would visit me only once a week, spending the remainder of his time with his other wives. Compounding my distress, my passport and all other identifying documents remained under his control, rendering any attempt to escape futile. I was effectively trapped within that place, devoid of any means to reclaim my freedom or contact my loved ones”.- (Nabeesa 41, Arab Marriage Survivor).

Now let us look at the nature of resources immigrants make use of while exercising their agency. One of the social resources apart from language when abroad, is neighbors and the nature of social interactions with them. With these people, one can share the immigrant experience and evolve in adaptation to various life challenges. But to access this resource the tool of language is needed (Wessendorf 2017).

In the case of the women examined in this study, their inability to leverage this linguistic resource is compounded by their limited proficiency in Malayalam, their native language. Moreover, their situation is exacerbated by the deliberate isolation imposed upon them by their husbands and in-laws, depriving them of opportunities for interaction with neighbors who may speak Malayalam and assist them in learning the new language. This enforced isolation is pivotal to the gender and human rights dimensions of the study.

From a biopolitical perspective, it is noteworthy that neither the husbands nor other influential individuals in the household demonstrate consideration or empathy towards the women's need for social interaction and emotional support in their native language. The reluctance of the in-laws to facilitate interactions with neighboring women, particularly those of Malayalis, stems from a fear that such interactions may lead to the women receiving assistance or contacting their families of origin. These interactions have the potential to empower women by providing them with a means of expressing themselves and accessing resources to navigate their circumstances. By limiting the women's social interactions, their husbands and in-laws seek to maintain control over them and prevent them from exercising political agency or autonomy.

Living in a foreign country, women survivors of these marriages had to depend on their husbands by default. The lack of awareness of the rules and regulations of their host countries made it impossible to escape without help. As mentioned earlier, the social resource of having neighbors to be a source of information or help as explained above does not apply to the women discussed here. The lives of Arab and Mali marriage survivors remained full of insecurity of residence, discrimination, cultural maladjustment, social alienation, battering and violence, unequal gender structures, denial of human rights, and lack of institutional protection. Special care was taken to not obtain citizenship rights for wives so that welfare benefits were denied to them.

As if the context of husband-mediated life in the new country and the new place was not already complicated for the wife, the constraints are unleashed upon the woman's body to have better control over her. We will see numerous instances of the same- restrained stepping out of the house, control of even observance of religious practices, of when to go to the toilet, etc.,

“My husband's family speaks only in Kannada, when they understood that I was learning their language they avoided me most of the time during the family interactions. I was isolated there. They didn't allow me to interact with neighbors or step out of the house alone. I was under their surveillance all the time. I felt like I am imprisoned” - (Saheema 29, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

The restraints upon a woman included those on the practice of religion. Few women responded that they found the difference in offering Namaz (prayers) in their husbands' families. One interesting case is that;

“My in-laws restricted me from doing Namaz. I told them that my natal family is very religious and does Namaz (Prayers) five times a day. But in my husband's family, they didn't allow me to do Namaz or read- the Quran. Whenever I did, they scolded me, my father-in-law even said that I was doing 'black magic' and they stopped interacting with me” - (Haseeba 42, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

Yet another instance of controlling the woman's body is resulting from the lack of facilities in the husband's home. Instead of any empathy for the woman suffering from the culture shock of having to use a public toilet when she was used to a small but private toilet facility, going to the toilet is further restrained by her husband who asked her to go only at night. As a result, the woman restricted her food and water intake during the day.

“It was very difficult for me to adjust there because of water scarcity and lack of private toilet facilities. The toilet was public. We have to be in the queue to take a bath and go to the toilet” - (Sabitha 31, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

Women reported that they had urinal and reproductive tract infections and other related diseases due to insufficient consumption of water, food, and unhygienic settlement. These women were denied the basic right of 'physical privacy' and the freedom to go to the toilet at any time they wanted.

"In my former husband's house, there was no toilet or bathroom facility; instead, there was a common toilet and bathroom for the entire settlement. My ex-husband restricted me from going to the toilet and instructed me to use the bathroom only during the night times. I was allowed to go early in the morning and late at night to the bathroom as well as the toilet. I stopped drinking water during that time and reduced my intake of food. I was also restricted from going to neighbors' homes and talking with them because they feared that I might come to know about their real color"- (Shareefa 39, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

Women are subject to stringent restrictions on their movements, including being closely monitored when they are permitted to use the restroom. Directives from their families of origin instructing them to comply with the expectations of being obedient daughters-in-law and to adapt to the dynamics within their marital households further impinge upon their right to privacy and fundamental human rights.

For these women, returning to their families in Kerala is not a viable option due to the economic hardships they left behind. Consequently, they find themselves trapped in dire circumstances, deprived of agency and autonomy. They face dual disenfranchisement within their marital families, stemming from their status as women from impoverished backgrounds and their experiences as survivors in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment

Local Brides vs. 'Foreign Brides' in Cross-Border Marriages

The differential treatment experienced by women survivors of cross-border marriages compared to local daughters-in-law underscores the impact of social and material factors on women's agency and status within their communities. The preference shown towards local daughters-in-law suggests a deep-seated bias or discrimination against women who come from different cultural or geographical backgrounds.

This preferential treatment may stem from various sources, including cultural norms, stereotypes, and perceptions about outsiders. Women who are perceived as belonging to the local community may be afforded greater acceptance and support, while those who are seen as "outsiders" may face marginalization and discrimination.

Moreover, the lack of social and material resources available to women survivors further exacerbates their vulnerability and limits their ability to assert their agency within their marital relationships and broader social contexts. Without the support networks and economic resources available to local daughters-in-law, survivors may find themselves more isolated and dependent on their husbands or in-laws, further undermining their autonomy and agency.

"After my marriage, my husband's two younger brothers got married. But my in-laws showed them much love and affection. I faced discrimination. They received support and care from my husband's family. Once my brother-in-law's wife got pregnant, my in-laws and husband asked me to get money (Rs.50000) from my home for her treatment. I got angry and denied their demand. For the next two days they denied me food and water"- (Sheena 32, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

Moreover, these local female in-laws make use of their relative power over women survivors in the form of participation or instigation of domestic violence, controlling even her right to conceive. They connive with male members of the family to control the woman survivors and thus strip her of all dignity reducing her to a bare life.

The participants who relocated to their husbands' homes post-marriage often encountered unwelcoming treatment, indicating a lack of acceptance within the marital household. The mother-in-law, in particular, harbored apprehensions about the Malayali bride forming a close bond with her son and potentially persuading him to return to Kerala. To prevent such scenarios, the Malayali bride was often prohibited from participating in family gatherings or events at her natal home, effectively isolating her from her familiar support system.

Role of Broker

As previously highlighted, brokers play a significant role in facilitating these marriages. They often deceive the bride's family with elaborate falsehoods, leading them to unwittingly fall into a trap. Ultimately, these innocent families and their daughters suffer the consequences of these marriages

"Despite being aware of the risks associated with cross-border marriages, the broker managed to persuade my parents that only a minority of women faced challenges in such unions, while the majority from Kerala were content with their husbands. Without much consideration, my parents consented to the marriage. Despite

my father and brothers visiting the groom's residence to make inquiries, the language barrier allowed the broker to handle all negotiations, leaving us vulnerable to deception.”- (Sameera 31, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

The influence exerted by human resources, such as brokers involved in arranging marriages, begins to manifest even before the marriage is finalized. These brokers, as previously discussed, play a significant role in orchestrating marriages. However, their involvement extends to manipulating the prospective bride's family, especially in cases where the groom's family does not speak Malayalam. By deceiving the bride's family into believing that the woman will enjoy a favorable life post-marriage, brokers further constrain the choices available to the bride and her family, perpetuating a cycle of limited agency and control.

“After our marriage, we settled in Mysore, where my husband utilized a portion of the dowry to purchase a sewing machine, intending to establish a source of income. Initially, everything appeared to be going smoothly. However, after three months, a man arrived at our doorstep and engaged in a heated argument with my husband. Perplexed by the confrontation, I sought clarification from our Malayali neighbors, who revealed that the man was the landlord and had demanded our immediate eviction due to five months of unpaid rent. This revelation shocked us, as the broker who arranged our marriage had misled us, claiming that the rented property belonged to her and her husband. Forced to vacate the premises, we hastily relocated to another rented house in the area.” - (Sulaikha 30, Mysore Marriage Survivor).

In Mysore marriages, a prevalent practice involves renting a suitable house for a temporary period until a suitable proposal is found for the groom. To add an air of legitimacy to the arrangement, duplicate relatives and parents are sometimes hired to present themselves to the bride's family. These "rented parents" and relatives play a role in convincing the bride's family of the groom's credibility and suitability for marriage.

The involvement of brokers further complicates the situation, as they often manipulate the bride's families into believing the authenticity of the arrangements. Consequently, the bride's family, unaware of the deception, proceeds with the wedding arrangements based on the false descriptions.

This deceptive practice highlights the exploitation and vulnerability of the bride's families in Mysore marriages. By relying on rented relatives and fabricated presentations, they unknowingly become entangled in arrangements that may not be genuine or conducive to the well-being of their daughters.

Conclusion

The intersection of religious injunctions, particularly within Sharia law, and the realities of cross-border marriages present a complex dynamic that underscores the importance of understanding legal and socio-cultural contexts. While marriage is indeed emphasized as a significant stage in women's lives within Sharia law, the requirement for mutual consent and understanding between partners is also emphasized.

The contradiction arises when marriages lack essential elements such as a common language or when coercion is involved, rendering them invalid according to Islamic principles. Despite this knowledge within the community, socio-economic pressures and other factors often lead to the continuation of such marriages, effectively devaluing women's voices and agency.

This highlights a significant gap between religious ideals and the lived experiences of individuals, particularly women, within certain communities. While religious teachings may espouse principles of equality and mutual respect within marriage, the reality may differ significantly due to broader social, economic, and cultural factors. Drawing from the narratives of women who have survived cross-border marriages, the author asserts that these unions are detrimental, marked by significant suffering endured by women due to the apathy of those involved in arranging the marriages. The socio-economic disadvantage faced by parents, coupled with entrenched patriarchal attitudes, blinds them to the challenges their daughters will confront in unfamiliar cultural, regional, and linguistic environments.

Crucially, the decision-making process often overlooks the perspective and concerns of the woman herself, with minimal consideration given to the groom's character or the attitudes of the in-laws. Following marriage, women frequently experience sustained instances of marital rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence, often instigated by demands for dowry or to fulfill household duties. Additionally, they are subjected to verbal abuse and may even be denied the right to conceive or engage with neighbors, further exacerbating their vulnerability.

Furthermore, the systematic denial of citizenship rights in the new country leaves women without access to welfare services during emergencies, completing their transformation into entities stripped of basic rights and agency.

In perpetuating patriarchy, women's bodies are objectified and consumed for sexual purposes, while simultaneously being controlled and supervised to serve hegemonic agendas. This objectification results in ~~the subordination of women and the perpetuation of various cruelties, treating them as mere commodities or~~

property belonging to men, whether as parents, husbands, or procurers. The 'objectifiers', including women's own families and their husbands, view them as objects to fulfill their respective purposes, denying them their personhood and autonomy.

While acknowledging the derogatory nature of the term "objectification," this study reveals that women are not perceived as individuals even by their family members, but rather as objects burdened with economic responsibilities or reduced to mere sexual objects for their former husbands.

The analysis of women's experiences in this study leads the author to characterize the position of impoverished women in contemporary society as "bare life," a term that is inherently gendered. These women are subjected to violence, abandonment, divorce, and poverty, and are left unprotected by the law. They are stripped of their rights and considered expendable, with their entire existence reduced to a state of vulnerability where anyone can inflict harm upon them with impunity. Women's bodies, in this context, become embodiments of "bare life," devoid of dignity bestowed by others and subject to norms imposed by patriarchal power. Through this paper, the author aims to examine the various ways in which women are constructed as "bare life" within patriarchal institutions, particularly within the confines of cross-border marriages. This exploration sheds light on the pervasive violence experienced by marginalized women, highlighting the role of power dynamics, body politics, gender hierarchies, and gender injustices inherent in the institution of marriage.

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