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'I arranged my own marriage': arranged marriages and post-colonial feminism

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‘I arranged my own marriage’: arranged marriages and post-colonial feminism

This article looks at the practice of arranged marriage among women of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin resident in Britain. It examines the conflation of arranged marriages with forced marriages and the assumption that arranged marriages are examples of cultural practices that thwart individual agency. Drawing upon original empirical data, this article will argue that in the practice of arranged marriage, some South-Asian women are able to exercise agency while choosing their marriage partner. They adapt traditional arranged marriage practices to navigate their way around strict cultural expectations and to negotiate with their family members the choice of a match that is favourable for them. It provides a corrective account of arranged marriages by challenging the stereotype of the ‘oppressed third world women’ and their experiences of such marriages. The article will do this by employing the idea of post-colonial feminism and by highlighting two long standing issues in feminist debates; the idea of agency and the conception and role of power in the struggle for women’s rights. It will make a case for a post-colonial approach to feminism as one way of reconciling feminism with the politics of multiculturalism.

Key words: British-Asians, arranged marriages, feminism, post-colonialism, power, agency

Introduction

This article examines the practice of arranged marriages from the perspective of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women resident in Britain. It will interrogate the assumption that arranged marriages always suppress women’s agency and choice. Drawing upon empirical research, this article will highlight the negotiations that are part of arranged marriages by describing the ways in which women work within the framework of a joint family in order to exercise their personal choices and aspirations through marriage. It will contest the orthodoxies surrounding the role of women in arranged marriages by showing that in the practice of arranged marriage, some Asian women are not always passive actors, but are

capable of navigating their way around cultural expectations in service of aims that suits them and their wider family.

The rights of immigrant women and their choices in relation to marriage has become a cause for concern for western governments and organisations who see arranged marriages as an extension of patriarchy where women have no say in who they marry. Prominent among these have been, commentators such as Ayan Hirsi Ali (2009) who in her book *The Caged Virgin* has made sweeping generalisations about the inherent patriarchal nature of Islam and its oppression of women. Publications such as *Generous Betrayal: Politics of Culture in the New Europe* by Unni Wikan (2002) and *Is multiculturalism bad for women* (Okin 1999) have also highlighted the problematic of accommodating non western migrant cultural practices related to marriage and family in a western welfare state setting. For Wikan and Okin, multiculturalism as a policy turns a blind eye to the oppression of women inherent in cultures that promote practices such as arranged marriages. Women who have an arranged marriage are seen as having given up on the ideals of agency, choice and love as prized ingredients of modern living and as victims of ‘the inertia of South Asian cultures’ (Talbani and Hasanali 2000,623 cited in Ahmed 2006,277). Western governments such as those in the UK, as Irene Gedalof (2007) has shown, continue to view arranged marriages with suspicion when it comes to immigration policy and citizenship. Moreover, right wing tabloid newspapers elide arranged marriages with forced marriages and represent women in such marriages as victims of their culture who are in need of liberation (e.g. Naipaul writing in the Daily Mail 18/08/2012, Rustin writing in The Guardian 14/05/2011, Leppard and Hussein writing in the Sunday Times 25/09/2005).

This portrayal is based on an image of what Puar (1995, 24) calls the ‘universal arranged marriage’, which views arranged marriage as a characteristic of male dominated and ‘underdeveloped’ societies and conflates it with the practice of forced marriage. Research (

Stopes-Roe and Cochrane 1990; Shaw 2000; Raj 2003) has documented that arranged marriages are not the same as forced marriages. At the onset, it is important to make clear the distinction between arranged and forced marriages. In arranged marriages, the parents and relatives of the person concerned take the lead in introducing them to a prospective spouse and the choice to agree or disagree with the choice of the match is always present. In current arranged marriage practices the two people involved are encouraged to meet with each other in chaperoned or unchaperoned dates to find out if they are suited as marriage partners. It is only when both parties agree that the marriage takes place. South Asians make a distinction between arranged marriages and 'love marriages'; where the latter do not always include the active involvement of the parents and other relatives in the arrangement. In contrast, forced marriage practices provide no such opportunities and are performed without the full consent of the two people getting married. Both men and women can be victims of forced marriages (www.gov.uk/forced-marriage). They are most commonly contracted in the UK under the sole direction of the family elders who against the wishes of the individuals concerned seek favourable forms of inheritance in family property or wish to continue traditions such as cousin marriages.

In this article, I argue that there is a need to theorise arranged marriage practices and the role of agency and power in the lives of women from lenses other than those that cast South-Asian women as victims of their cultures. All societies, whether patriarchal or otherwise, are complex assemblages where everyday life involves compromise, negotiation and flexibility in the dealings between men and women. For me, culture¹ provides the grounding for mapping out the power balance between the sexes. As such, I believe that feminism, if understood as a strategy for shifting the unequal power balance between men and women, also has its cultures of adaptation. For post-colonial feminists the struggles of

women are better recognized by looking carefully at ways in which they work within their extant cultural norms.

I use the term post-colonial here to refer to black and Asian feminists who have addressed the intersections of ethnicity, class and 'race' in feminist politics such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991,2003), bell hooks (1993),Prathibha Parmar (1982), Avtar Brah (1996,2003), Patricia Hill Collins (1998,2005), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1998) and Maivân Clech Lãm (1994).I prefer the usage of the term post-colonial feminists over black and minority ethnic feminists. This is because a postcolonial and more generally a post-structuralist mode of thinking provides me with a vocabulary to rethink the practice of arranged marriage through a more fluid epistemological foundation of negotiation, translation and hybridity (Rose 1995) in contrast to a more fixed ontological approach of essentialism and origin which is implied by the terms black and minority ethnic.

The significant question for me is, not how women can radically change their lives by an outright rejection of their cultural practices but how they navigate those existing norms, which to some eyes may seem oppressive and patriarchal (for example arranged marriages, the head scarf), to suit their life's hopes and ambitions and what reliance they seek from their religious and cultural heritages. In this article, I will highlight that women who opt for an arranged marriage are not just passively following cultural diktats but are capable of steering their way around cultural expectations to achieve what they want from a marriage. They do this, by modifying the existing norms of marriage in their culture to shift the balance of power in their favour. In this way, they are able to shape and articulate their own ideas about a post-colonial feminism that is 'fit for purpose' for changing power relations in a largely patriarchal cultural setting. The argument is divided into three parts: part one will review the extant literature on women and arranged marriage practices, part two will present three vignettes from the arranged marriage experiences of South Asian women as examples to

illustrate their takes on the significance of this practice in their lives, and part three will analyse the case for a post-colonial feminism by drawing upon Veena Das' (2010) work on agency and John Allen's (2003) work on power.

Arranged Marriages and Women

The literature on arranged marriages among South Asian women has focussed on four main themes – *the practice of dowry* (Ballard 1990, 2001; Sheel 2005; Kalpagam 2005; Biao 2005) *the immigrant status of women in a transnational marriage*, (Menski 1999; Abraham 2005) *consanguineous marriages* (Shaw 2001, 2006 ; Charsley 2007; Gardner 2008; Kuper 2008) and—from the field of education research—*the impact of education on the propensity to have an arranged marriage* (Bhopal 1999, 2000).

Roger Ballard (1990, 2001) has discussed the impact of dowry and kinship on the economic dynamics of transnational networks of South Asians. Ballard's work is based on fieldwork conducted in the 1970s and his analysis applies to early labour migration of male workers who, having settled in Britain, strategically arranged marriages or planned the migration of their wives, children and families to Britain. In more recent work, the Indian dowry system has been shown to have been instrumental in creating a global information technology (IT) force, where the dowry from an arranged marriage funds the passage of Indian IT professionals to the US in particular (Sheel 2005; Kalpagam 2005; Biao 2005). There is also research that is concerned with the precarious immigration status of women in transnational arranged marriages. Research (Menski 1999; Abraham 2005) has shown that the *dependent status* of the women, who are subject to spousal immigration grant, leaves them open to the risk of exploitative and violent relationships, with little or no means to support themselves if the marriage does not last for a probationary period needed to qualify for indefinite leave to remain (which can be as long as 5 years in Britain). In this literature, Asian

women in arranged marriages are defined by their roles as conduits of dowry and kinship with little or no agency and choice of their own.

The incidence of consanguineous marriages (marriages among close blood relatives such as cousins) among British Pakistanis has been the focus of research by anthropologists looking at marriage practices among South Asian Muslim communities (Shaw 2001, 2006; Charsley 2007; Gardner 2008; Kuper 2008). Through her ethnographic research among British Pakistanis, Shaw (2001, 2006) has shown that consanguineous marriages (also called cousin marriages) among British Pakistanis can be better understood by examining the wider political, economic and social frameworks from which practices such as cousin marriages derive meaning. Similarly, Charsley's (2007) research adopts a conceptual lens of risk when examining arranged marriages.

This literature departs from earlier work on arranged marriages by not focussing exclusively on arranged marriage as a strategy for migration and planning married life. Shaw and Charsley's research (2006), in particular, also takes into account the significance of emotions and interpersonal relations in arranged marriages. They use the term *rishta* (Hindu/Urdu word meaning 'match', 'connection' and/or 'proposal') in order to highlight the role played by the emotional ties of home and kinship as motivations for arranged marriages. Studies in the field of education (Bhopal 1999, 2000) have also concluded that although South Asian women with a higher education degree may be less inclined to have a traditional arranged marriage, there is also evidence to suggest that participation in higher education has provide women with the 'social capital' with which to negotiate their participation in arranged marriages (Bhopal 2011). What is clear from this literature is that arranged marriages cannot simply be explained through the lens of economic migration, nor is the previous focus on the subjugation of women's agency satisfactory. It is also important to note that not all arranged marriages involve bringing together one partner living in Britain with

another living in South Asia. Many are arranged entirely among people resident in Britain and as such arranged marriages cannot just be understood as an immigration strategy. This as Shaw and Charsley (2006, 409) note, ‘suggests that more subtle processes are at work than a simple recreation of the earlier phase of male-dominated labour migration within the constraints of current immigration restrictions.’

According to some authors (Carby 1982; Parmar and Amos 1982; Mohanty 1991), the reason for some earlier academic focus on the usual suspects such as *forces of tradition* and *patriarchy* as factors guiding the prevalence of arranged marriages among South Asians, can be attributed to a simplistic understanding of feminism which takes an ethnocentric stance when approaching women’s lives in non-western societies. Right wing media and commentators in the West, as Carby (1982, 216) argues can be party to an inherent commonsense racism which sees the western nuclear family structure and related ideologies of ‘romantic love’ formed under capitalism as more ‘progressive’ than black family structures. Some researchers while critiquing essentialism in ethnic and racial studies have described marriage as one of the most ‘exotic racist categories’ in accounts of South Asians in the UK (Sharma et al. 1996). This has led to the ‘pathologisation’ of British Asian families where the ‘trope of ‘arranged marriage’ circulates as a sign of [their] ‘otherness’ and as a site of intervention and domestication of that otherness’ (Ahmed, 2006:273).

The ‘pathologisation’ of British families can also be seen as a result of what Mohanty (1991; 51;2003) has called ‘white feminism’, drawing attention to the tendency of some observers in the West (for example Okin 1999; Wikan 2002; Ali 2009) to represent women of colour as the ‘monolithic third world woman’. This portrayal subsumes any difference between women from the Global South and their cultures under a single category of the ‘repressed third world woman’. Arranged marriage is thus deemed to enforce the very patriarchal structures which the ‘third world woman’ is in need of emancipation from. Such a

view precludes discussion of both; women who claim to have chosen to have an arranged marriage or women who do not equate freedom with adopting western ideals of womanhood. Research has shown how Asian women in Britain 'believe' in the institution of arranged marriage (Wilson 1978, 105) while being critical of some of the expectations that come with it (Bhopal 1999, 2009; Ahmed 2007). They actively negotiate their way around these expectations and in many cases adapt arrange marriage practices to suit their choice of a preferred spouse (Jhutti 1998;Shaw 2000; Ahmed 2001). However, in work that has shown that women are able to exercise agency in relation to arranged marriages, the respondents have nearly always been identified as educated, middle class and religiously-modern minded women from India (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Mukhopadhyay, 2012) or of Indian origin in the west (Jhutti 1998;Raj 2003). This article complements this research by showing that it is not just middle class women from India but also women from Pakistan and Bangladesh who are able to exercise choice and agency within an arranged marriage setting.

In what follows, I offer a more nuanced way of looking at arranged marriage and the role of women in its practice. I employ a post-colonial feminist approach to arranged marriages and show how it unsettles generalizations about the role of religious rules, the impact of parents/elders and the forces of tradition on the life choices of Asian women, when it comes to choosing a marriage partner.

Arranged marriages and women's agency: Three vignettes

In this section, I present vignettes from the lives of three women of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent. All of them had an arranged marriage and were now living in the North East of England. Their examples are drawn from my doctoral research project aimed at examining arranged marriages practices among men and women of South Asian descent living in Britain. The data for the vignettes were collected using semi-structured interviews conducted during fieldwork lasting a year in 2007-08. A total of 44 interviews were

conducted with men and women involved in arranged marriages. All interviews were tape recorded and translated into English and permission to do so was sought in advance. They were conducted in Hindi, Urdu, Sylheti or English. All names and identification details have been changed to maintain respondent anonymity.

It is important to note at this stage, that the three women discussed here are very different from each other in their national backgrounds, religious identification, age, class, educational qualifications and the level of their religiosity. However, what unites them is a commonality of the experience of having an arranged marriage, their interpretation of their roles in the arrangement and the reasons that they cited for choosing to have an arranged marriage. In their stories, we find a discourse of personal choice as well as aspirations and dreams of a happy marital future which stands in stark contrast to the dominant portrayal of women in arranged marriages as disempowered channels for fulfilling kinship and cultural obligations. The experiences of these three women also highlight that even though arranged marriages are singled out as a ‘key symbol’ of the lack of integration of South Asian populations in Britain today, they are in fact an ‘increasingly dynamic and socially negotiated practice’ (Shaw 2006, 209).

‘I arranged my own marriage’: Shabnam’s story

Shabnam is a Bangladeshi woman. I met her at a local college where she attends classes to improve her English language skills. She was in her early thirties and was married with two young children. She was born and brought up in Bangladesh where she met her British-born Bangladeshi husband with whom she moved to the UK. She is a practising Muslim, who although choosing not to wear a head scarf did cover her head with a loose fitting ‘duppatta’² when going to the mosque or other religious events. She referred to herself as ‘10th pass’, explaining to me that she had completed her high school education in Bangladesh. When I

met her in 2007, she had been living in North Tyneside for the last four years with her husband, her two children and her in-laws. She had ambitions of being able to speak ‘perfect English, without an accent’, but she admitted to her progress being very slow on account of not getting enough time to practice it at home where *Bangla* was the chosen language of communication. We met in the college library, and I asked Shabnam about her views on arranged marriages and about her own marriage. Shabnam explained that her husband, who was born in Britain, is from the same village as hers in Bangladesh. She said that although her marriage was arranged predominantly by her parents she did have a part in the arrangement:

Shabnam: The truth is [author] ...³ we lived in a small village in Bangladesh...my family wasn't modern at all...but I wanted to be modern ...you know..like the city girls.. and for me the only way to do that was to get married to someone in Britain..now a lot of people come back to Bangladesh to find especially a bride for their sons who were born abroad..so I had to very cleverly (laughs) let my parents know that I wanted this kind of a match. Of course I couldn't just ask my parents to do that..I had to drop hints and my aunt, whose advice my dad will never ignore was the one who presented the idea to him in such a way that he thought it came from him! (laughs)...and that is how I arranged my own marriage.

[author]: So how did you drop the hints about wanting to marry this man?

Shabnam: Oh the usual, you know, by saying it but also not saying it. They would think I had no shame if I just went up to my parents and pointed out the man I wished to be married to. We don't do things like that. After all, parents deserve their *izzat*. I am really close to my Aunt, she is the one who used to help me with homework and encourage me to study hard and make something of my life and become modern.

[author]: Modern? In what way?

Shabnam: I mean modern..you know...like you ...speak English, be independent ...and have the choice to dress in a modern way and most importantly when you are modern..men folk take you seriously ...no one listens to a village bumpkin...(laughs).

What is apparent from this exchange is that, in the practice of arranged marriage, Shabnam was not just a passive actor but had actively negotiated her way around cultural expectations in her own subtle way to realise her dream of becoming a modern woman. She worked within the framework of a joint family, and not against it, by cleverly moulding her parents' choice to fit with her wishes. She did not do this by just simply telling her parents who she wanted to marry because 'they don't do things like that' in her family. Instead, she worked with the joint-family structure, manipulating and negotiating her way around a culture which, though otherwise hostile to her speaking her mind directly, would happily submit to demands if made by following the proper channels of formality and ceremony.

Shabnam came across as an astute observer of her family politics and practices, so instead of telling her mother (a more obvious choice) about her wishes to marry a British Bangladeshi man, she chooses her elderly paternal aunt, who she knows commands respect from her father and whose opinion carries a lot of weight in her family. She chose her to convey her wishes to her father not only because she was viewed as having influence in decision making within the family but also because Shabnam knew that the idea of 'becoming modern' through marriage might appeal to an aunt who had encouraged her to study hard in school. Shabnam was sensitive to the significance of family honour and prestige in her culture hence the remark 'all parents deserve their *izzat*' where *izzat* translates as respect and the point about not coming across 'as shameless'. She managed to manoeuvre her father's desire for her marriage and also his *izzat* by carefully orchestrating the arrangement of her marriage in her favour. Shabnam's story highlights the delicate negotiations that are part of an arranged marriage. She *arranged her own marriage* to enable her to embrace a version of modernity that she wanted to become part of by immigrating to Britain. She is also aware of the power that comes with becoming modern. She says it is only when you are modern that men take you seriously.

Here it is worth noting that modernity, for her was defined in terms of progression towards a more westernised mode of being, one which is described in terms of catching up to the goods (as in material culture) and goods (as in some values and social structures) of ‘the west’. The desire for incorporating the modern with the traditional appeared to be a very conscious aspiration for her. Shabnam’s experience of ‘becoming modern’ through the ‘tradition’ of arranged marriage highlights the multiplicity and hybridity of modern life. The recognition of a western modernity as reflected in the values of individuality, freedom of choice and agency is paramount to her sense of a modern self. However, its interpretation is in keeping with what she sees as befitting a Bangladeshi cultural sensibility; where the respect for elders (*izzat*) and traditionally defined channels of communication and propriety are also to be valued and observed.

Arranged marriage and community: Kanta’s story

Kanta describes herself as British-Indian and has been married to Alok, an Indian born orthopaedic surgeon for four years. She is in her mid twenties and works as a chemist in a pharmaceutical company. She is originally from London where her mother and sisters still live. She describes herself as being from a Hindu-Punjabi middle-class family. She told me that she met Alok at a friend’s wedding in London. He had been in the UK to advance his professional training. Kanta explains that her marriage is a modern kind of arranged marriage, in that she ‘arranged to fall in love’ with the right person. Growing up in an Asian family in London, she said she ‘knew what her boundaries were’ especially in terms of who she ‘could go out with’. She described how she was lucky that she fell in love with a Hindu Punjabi boy. She also explained that her mother is a single parent bringing up three daughters on her own in a foreign country and as such it was important for Kanta as the eldest child to be an example for her younger siblings ‘by not going against all cultural expectations’. She clarified that cultural expectations weren’t just the usual caste, class and religion concerns but

also about not ‘being rash’ when choosing to marry someone. According to her, a marriage will only last if ‘you think with your head *and* your heart’.

Kanta’s marriage has all the hallmarks of an arranged marriage: religious, ethnic, and kinship links. However, Kanta’s marriage was not arranged for her by others. Rather, Kanta arranged her own marriage according to her own desire to forge an identity within a particular community. Kanta appeared to have a very clear idea of the importance of the decision to get married and how it would determine the future shape of her life. She used the term ‘institution’ when referring to marriage. She explained that she had rationally thought through the decision to get married and that although she did fall in love first with the man who would eventually become her husband, it was not just based on an impulse:

Kanta: Marriage is not a joke..it is not something we take lightly ..especially in our culture..it is for life and so ...well for seven lives according to Hinduism (laughs). I wasn’t in a hurry neither to fall in love nor to get married. And when I met Alok...I really liked him ..it sounds strange but I did weigh the pros and cons of this arrangement... see marriage is an arrangement , whether you fall in love or not...isn’t it? Especially in modern times .. One had to see whether the institution of marriage was going to work for me in that period in my life and I reasoned to myself yes it would..that I wanted a life partner and that it was going to be Alok and he did fit the bill.

In the above discussion with Kanta, what becomes apparent is that the reason why she decided to get married was based on a reflexive understanding of the value of the practice of marriage. She recalled that she discussed the pros and cons of the institution of marriage and whether it would work for her. She referred to having a ‘plan’ about what course her life would take, she wanted to ‘play her cards right’ and ‘not hurry into getting married’ as this would have adverse consequences for her biographical narrative which was geared towards ‘making a success of her life’. Consequently, her marriage decision was a result of careful thought and planning to steer her life in a particular direction and build a shared sense of self and identity as part of a married couple. However within this framework of managing one’s

identity as a project (Giddens, 1991) and crafting a biographical narrative, Kanta also drew upon the resources of her culture. For example, she referred to how ‘in her culture’ marriage is not a decision they take lightly. She was convinced that her individual agency was involved in her rational decision to get married and that there was also an element of chance as she had fallen in love with Alok. She claimed that she had an arranged *and* love marriage - this is because she was able to exercise a degree of self-censure by ‘arranging to fall in love’ with a person who would fit in her family’s criteria of who could make her ideal partner. She would not have crossed certain boundaries and upset her family by for example marrying somebody who was in her words not ‘very family orientated’. Family approval of her chosen partner was important for her, she wanted to marry somebody who could be a father figure to her younger sisters and support her mother in her old age. One could also argue that growing up in an all women household without a father had an impact on Kanta’s view on the significance of making the ‘right choice’ when it comes to marriage. The social premium of being part of a community that comes with having an arranged marriage was thus a significant factor in her plan for a married life. Kanta explained:

‘ You see.... I cannot boycott my own... society. We are a community, especially as Asians in Britain... community support is important. I want to have kids ..we want a social circle..and at the end of the day if I am not a part of a community and participate in their give and take ...who will come to my funeral?’

So, by treading a fine line between being modern and traditional in agreeing to have a love and arranged marriage, Kanta had advanced her life in the direction of earning her membership of a migrant community and developing a sense of group identity as an Asian in Britain.

A feminism fit for purpose: Khadija’s story

Khadija was born in Pakistan but came to Britain as a baby. She is in her mid forties, and has

lived all her life in the North East of England. When I met her, she was employed as a secretary in a university department. She described herself as a practicing Muslim. She wears a headscarf, which she told me she had only chosen to wear in the last couple of years. The reason for this change was in her words ‘a spiritual awakening when she turned 40’. She said that for her the headscarf was a reminder of her religious obligations and her closeness to Allah. She has been married for 25 years and has two grown-up daughters in their early twenties. Khadija told me that she got married at the age of 18 and that her husband was her close friend’s brother. She explained that when she got married it was the norm in Pakistani families to arrange marriages among close cousins, ‘you were spoken for, as a future bride for your first cousin, if there was one, in the paternal side of the family’. She did not personally like or approve of the habit and said that she tried her best to persuade her parents to arrange her marriage with somebody outside the family. She cited medical as well as personal reasons for not wanting to marry a first cousin;

Khadija: I know that the kids of couples related to each other by blood can be born with congenital diseases. We see it all over among Pakistani families..no one wants to say it ..but cousin marriage is a reason . Also, to tell you the truth, I did not like my Aunt a bit , she is very strict with her kids... and the thought of having her as my mother-in-law..No way..I’d rather never get married.

Khadija was able to convince her parents to not arrange her marriage with a close cousin, but explained that her demand put extra pressure on her parents because when cousin marriage is the norm, any reluctance to follow the practice is seen as ‘failing your culture’ and its expectations. A compromise was reached when her childhood friend suggested that her family was looking for a bride for her brother and that perhaps Khadija and her family members would be interested. She did confess that she was lucky to be able to have this choice and that not everyone would always have the courage to defy community norms when it came to cousin marriages. When I asked her what had contributed to her luck, Khadija’s

view was that ‘sometimes you make your own luck’. She had been aware of the family expectation about cousin marriages from a very early age. Since she did not approve of the practice she decided that she had ‘to work on’ her parents’ views:

Khadija: You have to fight...drag your heels really....It is not easy but then nothing worth having in life is easy. I did have faith though... that my dad is a reasonable man and he will listen to me if I could make a good enough case. After all he knows that I am his daughter and can be as stubborn as him!

Khadija’s point about making your own luck is interesting. She did not claim that she just had the lucky circumstance of being born in a middle class family with a ‘reasonable’ man as her father. Instead, she also talked about having the ‘courage to defy community norms’, which she also acknowledged not every woman from her cultural background would have. Her story reflects her agency as a woman of strong character (in her words ‘stubborn’) who actively intervened in family decisions that affected her. She was also one of only two women among my research participants who explicitly used the English term ‘feminism’. Khadija referred to me as a feminist and argued that she was not my kind of feminist. When I asked her about the reason for this argument, she mentioned that because she does not have a PhD and does not know the theory of feminism. However she had a clear view of the kind of feminist she thought she was:

Khadija: You see I am not a modern feminist, I don’t regard men as adversaries, how can I? They are my brothers, my fathers, my uncles and my husband. I could not live with myself..being against them..it would be too much of a loss. But then again I know I can’t always live under their control... they are victims of culture too..so I had to fight, manipulate, work. Your kind of feminism doesn’t work for me it...it is too airy fairy..my feminism is a fit for purpose kind of thing..though you wouldn’t see it at first with my headscarf and all (laughs).

Khadija’s view on feminism is very revealing of her consciousness as a woman who has had to fight and work to make her wishes come true. I believe when she says ‘I am not a

modern feminist', she wants to distinguish herself from the caricature of radical feminists as 'man haters'. Yet her life shows aspects of feminist struggle; of negotiation and work in shifting the power balance in her favour. She has achieved this not by outrightly rejecting and rebelling against the authority of men but by using the soft powers of compromise, tact and manipulation. Her remark about men also being 'victims of culture' shows a nuanced understanding of the relationship between culture and power. In direct contradiction of the simplistic 'third world' and 'oppressed woman' imagery which she feels can be projected on her because she wears a headscarf, Khadija sees herself as a practical feminist. In some media representations of arranged marriages, as I have argued earlier in this article, women are represented as victims of their cultures, they are represented as having no choices, as beings whose lives are dictated by men and cultural obligation. However, Khadija's story provides a counterpoint to those representations by showing that she is a skilful user of cultural norms whose 'fit for purpose' feminism works within the context of her family in helping her achieve what she wants from an arranged marriage.

A Post-Colonial Feminism: is it all about compromise?

My aim in this article had been to offer a corrective account of arranged marriages to contest dominant stereotypes of the passive role of women in arranged marriages. Shabnam, Kanta and Khadija's stories show that unlike the ethnocentric stance on arranged marriages, which too often portrays the practice as disadvantaging women and their agency, they were actively involved in the arrangement of their marriages as it suited their choice and aspirations.

Moreover, their life stories do not fit within a narrative of victimhood. Nowhere in my conversations with them did I find them lamenting their state as 'third world women' lacking 'the free choice of a love marriage' that their western counterparts are seen to enjoy. Instead, what I found was that for Shabnam, Kanta and Khadija, family was central to their understanding of relationships and of belonging to a community at large. They had actively

embraced the institution of marriage with the aim of setting up their own nuclear or extended family unit. The affective and/or instrumental appeal of the idea of family featured very strongly in their lives. This is not to say that they regarded the 'family' or its composition to be unproblematic and blameless. There was an acknowledgement of what is wrong with current South-Asian views on family and the expectations of the role of women within it. Shabnam, Kanta and Khadija were all subversive to varying degrees in their engagement with family expectations and ideals about marriage and their role in it. Yet they did this whilst remaining committed to their ideals about family. Here post-colonial-feminism was finding a role within rather than outside the structures of the family. This is also in keeping with new research which has highlighted the diversity of Indian women's experiences and struggles related to different types of marriage and family settings (Sen, Biswas and Dhawan 2011).

My interviewees subscribed to a view of feminism which was 'fit for purpose' to achieve their goals in an arranged marriage and varied considerably in ambition: for Shabnam it was wanting to embrace a version of modernity, for Kanta it was incorporating the idea of falling in love in an arranged marriage setting, and for Khadija it was taking a stance against cousin marriages. They achieved this by working with and not against the scripts that regulate gender relations in their cultures. In this way they were successful in extracting a favourable 'bargain with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti 1988), whereby in spite of both genders complying with the existing cultural rules and regulations governing gender relations, there is always room for these gender roles and rules to 'be contested, redefined and renegotiated' (Kandiyoti 1988, 286). The individual power tactics of these three women were central to their success in achieving what they wanted from an arranged marriage. In this process they were also instrumental in redefining and readapting the customs and rituals of arranged marriages to suit their identities as Asian women in Britain.

So how do their accounts of arranged marriages inform our understanding of post-colonial feminism? Is it just about compromise and bargaining for power? I argue that it is not. While compromise does play an important role in renegotiating the terms of patriarchy to suit the ambitions and desires of these women, it is not the sole characteristic of what Khadija referred to as a feminism 'fit for purpose'. These examples of women arranging their own marriages call for a more nuanced look at two long standing issues in debates on feminism; the idea of agency and the conception of power and its role in the struggle for women's rights. I will discuss both of them in turn.

A post-colonial view of feminism calls for thinking about agency in much more complex ways. Veena Das (2010, 137) has argued that there is a tendency in social theory to view agency as something to be detected only at 'moments of resistance or at moments of transgression'. In this view of agency, ordinary life and its expressions are seen as products of habit not requiring any active agency. Das argues that this is a flawed model of agency which borrows from a certain kind of heroic view of resistance and which does not give due recognition to the daily struggles, tactics and strategies which are involved in enacting everyday life. A similar argument is made by James Scott (1985) in his book *Weapons of the Weak*, where he shows how everyday practices of resistance are employed by Malaysian peasants in disputes involving land rights. Following from this, this article has shown that in the lives of these three South Asian women in northeast England, agency was not manifest in spectacular expressions of resistance against existing cultural norms but rather in everyday acts of resistance and negotiation. So Khadija, with her headscarf and her arranged marriage, on the surface looks like a woman quietly following cultural prescriptions of dress and conduct and showing no agency. But by digging deeper we find a woman with her own idea of feminist agency actively contesting the forces of patriarchy. She does not believe in seeing 'men as adversaries' but believes in working everyday in 'making her own luck' so as to be

able to negotiate an arranged marriage which suits her life ambitions. She sees herself as someone with agency. Khadija's feminism is not manifest in a romantic resistance to the family. Instead, we observe a cautious acknowledgement of how both genders are victims of their cultures and how from this view men and women can work hand in hand to change structures that affect them adversely. In this way post-colonial feminism is inspired by bell hooks' assertion that 'men must be part of the feminist movement, and they must feel that they have a major role to play in the eradication of sexism' (1993, 37).

Approaching agency from this perspective also necessitates giving due recognition to the role of soft power in post-colonial feminist struggle. As much as one might wish for organised feminism and revolutions, which will reverse the power balance overnight, we find that the zero sum idea of power where power has to be seized from men does not always work. John Allen's (2003) conception of the modalities of power is useful to illustrate this point. Allen argues that power is not capacity that is held by a select few or kept in reserve to be unleashed at opportune times but instead 'a relational effect of interaction' (2003, 2). He lists domination, authority, seduction, manipulation, coercion, negotiation and persuasion as examples of the modalities of power which both men and women have access to. Since social interaction is an essential aspect of our lives, power is something that all of us can exercise depending on which modalities of power we choose to subscribe to. Along similar lines, Nancy Hartsock's work on 'the feminist theory of power' understands power as 'energy and competence rather than dominance' (Hartsock, 1983, 224). The emphasis on the relational aspect of power and of wider social processes (See Tilly 2002) is key to understanding the ways in which power is exercised by women in joint and extended families among South Asians. Familial relations can lend themselves to manipulation, negotiation and persuasion and as such they feature most prominently in the women's stories here. For example, we find Khadija using the powers of negotiation in 'making a good case' against cousin marriage to

her parents. We see manipulation working for Shabnam as a way to make her family politics work in her favour. As such, adopting a post-colonial perspective on feminism and giving due recognition to the various modalities of power can help us to see that some women are able to exercise power by utilising its different types of modalities to achieve their own empowerment.

Conclusions

The examples cited here challenge ethnocentric interpretations of arranged marriage practices and the role of women within them. However, it is important to note that this is not an invitation to cultural relativism. Instead it calls for more plural and nuanced understandings of the cultural and social factors that guide women's life choices in non-western cultural settings. It is important to acknowledge that not all arranged marriage practices are the same and that not all offer opportunities for exercising choice and agency in ways the women featured in this article have been able to do. Dominant cultural norms can sometimes marginalise vulnerable individuals among South Asians. However, by focussing mostly on cases where arranged marriages have gone wrong (as media representations of arranged marriages almost always do) we miss out on the opportunity to engage with the social and cultural universes of meaning that non-western women ascribe to such practices. Moreover, as Ann Phillips (2009,41 my emphasis) has argued 'differentiating between choice and coercion is central to solving' the confusion between forced and arranged marriages but in doing so we have to '*understand cultural pressures but not assume that culture dictates*'. Rather than dismissing certain cultural practices, such as arranged marriages, as mere signs of the hold of tradition and patriarchy on Asian women's lives, we need to recognise the cultural negotiations and reflexive engagements that are embedded in its practice.

This article has shown that in the practice of arranged marriages, some women both exercise agency and wield power by working within everyday family politics to secure a

partner of their choice. The article has highlighted the disjuncture between those *portrayals* of arranged marriage which cast it as a patriarchal practice and the *experience* of the women participating in it. Furthermore, it has highlighted the gendered geographies of arranged marriage practices by examining the diversity of views and life experiences that characterise the lives of the women that are bundled together under the homogenous category ‘Third World women’. The intersectionality of religion, class, and ethnicity (Crenshaw 1991) has influenced the ways in which the practice of arranged marriages is adapted to suit the personal aspirations of Asian women. Their agency takes various shapes and forms which, though not always easily recognizable to a western cultural sensibility, can nonetheless be ‘fit for purpose’ for achieving what they want from the institutions of marriage and family. By acknowledging the fluidity, hybridity and dynamic nature of feminist identifications, these examples of post-colonial feminism offers scope for engaging with a diversity of feminist subjectivities.

Acknowledgements

Notes

¹ I borrow my understanding of culture from Ann Swidler (1986, 277) who defines culture not as ‘a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction...[but as].. a ‘tool kit’ or repertoire’ which can be conceived as being malleable and amenable to change under the right kind of incentives (Phillips, 2009:28).

² The *dupatta* is an organza shawl which is part of traditional sub-continental women’s outfit called *salwaar kameez*.

³Transcript symbols

.. short pause

... long pause

Notes on contributor

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