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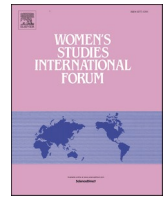
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Girls just wanna have fun! South Asian women in the UK diaspora: Gradations of choice, agency, consent and coercion

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ABSTRACT

Much literature views South Asian women in the UK through the prism of arranged marriage and, when discussing gender-based violence, forced marriage. Little attention is paid to South Asian women's experiences of dating, with no commitment to marriage. This paper is based on qualitative research using the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality to analyse how women, who feel they are making their own choices and exercising agency by dating, can, through gendered power dynamics be pressured into marriages. This paper explores how such experiences can elucidate the manifestations of forced marriage and adds to this complex picture of how women entering an intimate relationship of choice, can be entrapped into forced marriage.

1. Introduction

Much of current discourse positions South Asian women in the UK diaspora (hereafter referred to as South Asian women) wholly through a lens of marriage where South Asian women are only interested, solely wanting, and desiring and therefore always ready for marriage. This underlying coding of women and marriage tends to thread through various forms of arranged marriage practice, and of forced marriage where women are coerced into marriage. Such positioning is problematic because South Asian women form intimate relationships in other ways which are often excluded or not considered. Experientially as well as conceptually, literature has yet to explore fully South Asian women's experiences of initiating intimate relationships without their parents' knowledge nor involvement and imperatively, without a commitment or expectation to marry.

This paper emanates from a study that set out to explore South Asian women's experiences of intimate partner and familial violence, where the women had formed a relationship outside of any type of arranged marriage practice. The findings showed that women participants were coerced and entrapped into marriage because they were dating and hence subverting so-called respectable arranged marriage norms prevalent in their communities. Women's experiences of choice of partner, against a backdrop of their socialisation into arranged marriage and subsequent experiences of gender-based violence, as a result of acting on

their choice, are explored. How women experienced a continuum from choice and consent to entrapment and coercion into forced marriage is examined. How women's decision-making is navigated within the context of power relations in the family, and how routes they may have wanted to take are closed down, are discussed.

Black Feminists have directed attention to the ways in which increasing degrees of coercion, power, and pressure portrayed as choice and consent are brought to bear on women (Anitha & Gill, 2009; Wilson, 2006; Phillips & Dustin, 2004; Siddiqui, 2003b). Gradations of coercion and power can manifest at various points on the marriage continuum which gives visibility to and provides insights into, the complexities of South Asian women's experiences of marriage (Bates, 2018; Anitha & Gill, 2009, 2011; Dustin & Phillips, 2008; Wilson, 2006; Siddiqui, 2003a, 2013; Bhopal, 2011; Phillips & Dustin, 2004). However, women's experiences of dating their partners, with no intention to marry and yet finding themselves forced into marrying them is a gap in scholarship. Hence, this paper makes an original contribution to the conceptualisation of forced marriage, offering new insights where third-party pressure vitiates consent both in relation to the timing of the marriage and crucially, the choice of partner.

The multiple disadvantages that women occupy in marriage require an intersectional lens to unpick and dissect the effect of cumulations of situational disadvantages that lead women to respond in the ways they do, and how their agency is not a simple binary of resistance or

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compliance. How much the decision to marry feels like a choice to South Asian women depends on the power dynamics in the family and any structural barriers that can limit their choice or put choice out of their reach.

This paper is underpinned by empirical research using a qualitative approach. Three participant narratives have been chosen because their experiences best demonstrate how those who feel they are making choices and exercising agency by entering relationships through dating, can, through gendered power dynamics, be pressured into marriages that are much less free than they originally hoped and believed. This paper explores how such experiences can elucidate the manifestations of forced marriage. This paper adds to this complex picture of women's decision-making specifically how entering an intimate relationship of choice can entrap them into a forced marriage.

The paper begins with the theoretical framework consisting of Black Feminist Theory together with Intersectionality as an analytical tool. It provides a review of existing literature on the gendered nature of socialisation into arranged marriage. It also covers gender-based violence including forced marriage and the social construct of honour. It teases out the complex nature of South Asian women's choice and agency within intimate relationships. A qualitative research methodology was employed to explore such experiences. The three participant narratives form the basis of the results with the key themes discussed thereafter.

2. Black feminist theory and intersectional analysis

Black Feminist Theory (BFT) locates women's experiences through the multiple social categories they occupy that inform the context of their world. To understand the specific experiences and issues that South Asian women face when it comes to the intricacies of choice of intimate partner requires the critical insight that intersectionality provides, by analysing the workings of control and power at the intersections of gender, age, poverty, and culture amongst other axes of difference (Chantler & Thiara, 2017).

BFT employs analysis of the expectations placed on women through social norms and parental involvement, driven by patriarchal control. It situates socialisation into marriage and its significance in South Asian women's lives within gender inequality, as opposed to essentialising and framing within cultural terms (Anitha & Gill, 2011; Chantler & Thiara, 2017). BFT dissects the gendered nature of honour and shame where women maintain community and family respect (Gill & Brah, 2014), especially when women's behaviour is viewed to be outside of family and community expectations such as dating a partner. Dating is having an intimate relationship without family involvement, – one such transgression where family honour has been brought into disrepute (Siddiqui, 2013). BFT uniquely engages with, and delivers, a deeper analysis to understand women's agency and choice when dating and how dating may lead to patriarchal control.

Intersectionality draws attention to the parallel constraints women face both in the family, and externally, to provide a nuanced understanding of how gendered role expectations, age, lack of access to services, loss of education and hence employment opportunities shape women's experiences, and how their choices and options are shutdown (Chantler & Thiara, 2017; Siddiqui, 2016; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Gill, 2004). Intersections of age, marital status, and gender represent a complexity that requires women to be able to advocate for themselves that not only goes beyond a framing of culture or ethnicity but gives them a voice (Barn & Sidhu, 2004).

A BFT critique, combined with using an intersectional lens, is fundamental to knowledge production highlighting how South Asian women can experience all the following in connection to one intimate relationship: dating, forced marriage, intimate partner violence and familial violence (Anitha & Gill, 2009; Dustin & Phillips, 2008; Wilson, 2006). A critique of such experiences requires exploration of into the gendered socialisation of marriage and of partner choice in South Asian

diasporic communities in the UK.

3. Gendered socialisation into marriage

The social construct of arranged marriage, as practiced within diasporic communities in the UK, secures and preserves status within family, kinship, and communities (Bhopal, 2011; Brah, 1996; Pande, 2014, 2016; Siddiqui, 2003b; Zaidi & Shuraydi, 2002). Partners are selected by families and parents based on caste, religion, family wealth, and status (Bhopal, 2011; Pande, 2014). Feminist scholarship has extensively covered South Asian women's experiences of the practice of arranged marriage highlighting the many ways choice and consent manifest when agreeing to marry (Pande, 2014, 2016) and the evolving nature of arranged marriage (Pande, 2014; Siddiqui, 2003a).

Forced marriage, on the other hand, is a form of gender-based violence where physical force, emotional and psychological pressures, or the combination thereof, coerce women into marriage (Siddiqui, 2003a). Dominant discourses often facilitate a binary distinction between arranged and forced marriage (Bhopal, 2011; Enright, 2009) which do not reflect the subtle emotional pressures from families, which can be conceptualised as domestic abuse, where the marriage is not arranged but instead forced (Anitha & Gill, 2009; Wilson, 2007).

The socialisation into marriage, specifically the presumption of compulsory arranged marriage, constructs gender-role expectations of South Asian women as good wives, mothers, and daughters (Kallivayalil, 2010), where their primary obligation is to their fathers, husbands, and extended family with their own needs, wants and desires being secondary (Ahmed et al., 2009). Socialisation of honour encompasses expectations of behaviour and of its relative opposite, shame, which is realised through transgressions of these expected traits of behaviour (Gill and Brah 2014) and the consequences for women (Sen, 2005; Siddiqui, 2013; Gill & Brah, 2014). Disclosing familial or intimate partner violence can bring shame and dishonour on families (Tonsing & Barn, 2017; Siddiqui, 2013). Families may therefore control the behaviour and agency of women who defy their patriarchal power (Wilson, 2010) in order to preserve the family's social status in the community and redeem their honour by forcing women to marry (Siddiqui, 2013) or to ostracise them (Tonsing & Barn, 2017; Gill and Brah 2014). Hence women "face very real consequences if they find themselves transgressing the norms of their community, whatever the reason" (Patel, 2003, 249). They may lose family support and become isolated, be prevented from furthering their education, as well as experience further violence and abuse from both their families and intimate partners. This prevents women from speaking out about their continued experiences of harm and abuse (Tonsing & Barn, 2017; Siddiqui, 2013). Furthermore, such barriers inform women's decisions on how much to reveal or not reveal, not only to their families but also to researchers.

Shame and honour are "used to control female sexuality and autonomy" (Siddiqui, 2005, 264), where women maintain, and men uphold family and community honour (Gill & Brah, 2014). By following through on behalf of men to uphold honour, older women, as mothers and mothers-in-law may find this to be the only avenue to accessing power and status in the family and community (Siddiqui, 2013; Kandiyoti, 1988). In patriarchal extended families, mothers-in-law can exert power over daughters, sons and daughters-in-law (Kandiyoti, 1988). In essence, behaviours and decision making by women, their families and communities are influenced and controlled by notions of shame (Tonsing & Barn, 2017). The control is driven by what is considered to be acceptable social norms and values within social groups (Tonsing & Barn, 2017) It is therefore important to explore women's agency and choice to deconstruct how power and control may impact on women's experiences and influence their decision making.

4. Choice and agency

Majumdar (2007) criticises the dichotomy of South Asian women's

agency into “traditional” versus “modern”, where arranged marriage is an example of women acting within a “traditional” culture. Such notions can feed into beliefs that South Asian women in the diaspora, by exercising notions of freedom of choice, such as dating, are confirming their British belonging by adhering to British values (Enright, 2009). In contrast, parents arranging marriage for their children disaffirms British belonging (Enright, 2009), thus reinforcing tropes of traditional versus modern marriage practices; western and liberated, versus subordination without agency (Gill, 2004; Mahmood, 2005; Majumdar, 2007).

Women can face conflicting ‘pulls’ between their own individual wants and cultural obligations and societal expectations (Chantler et al., 2018). Furthermore, South Asian women’s behaviours are enmeshed within the needs of and reverence for community and family, that is gendered and socially constructed (Anitha & Gill, 2011). Interacting with families on choice of partner can involve complex negotiation of patriarchal power within social norms (Siddiqui, 2013). It can be a form of patriarchal bargaining where women resist subtly in myriad of ways, whilst staying within the constraints of patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988). Adhering to notions of honour, women broker and exercise “varying degrees of choice” of partner (Bhopal, 2011, 443), choosing to leverage, weigh options, evade, re-evaluate the practices and values they took for granted (Hussain, 2019).

The complexity of South Asian women’s agency, choice, coercion and consent when entering marriage (Dustin & Phillips, 2008; Wilson, 2006) results from power imbalances between the woman and her family and community, where women consent even in the absence of explicit threats (Anitha & Gill, 2011). Women can find themselves amidst “an arena of struggle, which may be emotional or physical, and is affected by a complex set of interacting issues, from emotional blackmail and low self-esteem to isolation and exclusion as a result of racism” (Wilson, 2010, 64).

Oppression within family, racism and neoliberal policies work together to curtail women’s choices around marriage and ability to reject an arranged or forced marriage. Neoliberalism’s high regard for the protection of individual choice such that each person “is held responsible for and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being” (Harvey, 2005, 65) fails to acknowledge women’s ability to negotiate. It fails to acknowledge how it is for South Asian women when it comes to choice in marriage due to gendered socialisation together with family and community pressure. This leaves them vulnerable to forced marriages (Wilson, 2006). Enright (2009, 348) argues that the UK’s statutes give a commitment to free choice in marriage for South Asian women in the UK, but do not support women to tackle the barriers, and effect sustainable change, in their lives by providing adequate access to appropriate refuge and domestic violence services (Chantler et al., 2018; Sandhu & Stephenson, 2015). Structural, familial, and social constraints are the realities that affect decision-making, that ensures that South Asian women do not have a straightforward binary choice whether to agree to marry or not.

Understanding women’s agency is more than mere binary notions of resistance versus subordination (Kandiyoti, 1988). Mahmood (2005, 14) questions the tendency to see agency in opposing “subversion or resignification of social norms” by feminists. She explains, “what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view may actually be a form of agency - but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment” (Mahmood, 2005, 15). Kandiyoti’s (1988) discussion on patriarchal bargains show the layers of negotiation and strategizing women take to make choices in conjunction with gendered socialisation. For example, in seeking the safeguard of family protection if they face difficulties in their relationship, South Asian women may choose to have an arranged marriage (Mohee, 2011). Or they may refrain from forming an intimate relationship to maintain ties with their family (Wilson, 2007; Anitha & Gill, 2009). Resistance and subordination do not map directly onto the agency and non-agency binary, but each act is considered autonomously

in its own ethical and political context (Mahmood, 2005). Indeed, South Asian women’s experiences of forming romantic intimate relationships can become the very barrier to leaving them (Sandhu & Barrett, 2020). Shining a light on what may be seen to be South Asian women turning their backs on empowering choices, are in fact acts of resilience and resistance, reflecting the diversity of negotiating such structural constraints (Hussain, 2019) and patriarchal bargaining (Kandiyoti, 1988).

5. Methodology

Black Feminism was employed as the qualitative research approach, to give voice to South Asian women’s experiences and an insight into the workings of gendered control and power when women are responding to familial and intimate partner violence (Collins, 2015; Siddiqui, 2016). Intersectional analysis theorises through the multiple social locations of gender, age, culture, and socio-economic status that the women occupied. It provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how women, when choosing their own partners, negotiate the accumulation of power that builds up against them because they are poor, are young women with no access or support for independent living and decision making.

The research was given ethical approval by the university Ethics Committee with protocols of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity being scrupulously adhered to.

The participants were recruited via a combination of existing professional networks of the lead author and by social media. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were held with the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded, with the consent of the participants. The audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The transcripts were coded to identify significant subject areas relevant to the research. Thematic analysis was applied by linking and grouping the codes into identifying patterns that reflected themes which included conflict and entrapment (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

5.1. Trust between researcher and participants

Feminist research approaches have pioneered non-hierarchical relationships between researcher and “researched” (Letherby, 2003; Oakley, 1981). To this end, researching vulnerable groups of participants requires not only sensitivity in the research approach but also mutual respect and trust between the researcher and the ‘researched’.

The experiences of the researcher at the intersections of gender, class, age and ethnicity have “bearings upon the relationship between the researcher and the researched” (Bhopal, 2000, 73). The positionality of the researcher undertaking the fieldwork, as a gendered, racialised South Asian woman researcher, researching other South Asian women, was central to giving voice to women who wanted to tell their stories, who otherwise may not be heard (Mirza, 2009). The differences in socio-economic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, reflected the heterogeneous, multifarious social and political positions we occupy, as researcher and research participants and as South Asian women in the UK today.

At the same time, the lead author found the shared, gender and racial identity led participants, as situated knowers, to reveal very intimate and traumatic experiences (Collins, 2000). The participants chose to share and express their specific experiences with the assumptions, and indeed expectations, that the researcher identified with their experiences and hence did not have to explain the context of their lives and relationships with families as well as their intimate partners. The mutual acknowledgement and understanding did not dilute the sense of injustice felt by the lead researcher but rather heightened it, precisely because the researcher came from similar heritage and background (Ochieng, 2010).

5.2. Krishna, Parveen and Gurpreet - The participants

The participant narratives presented in this paper were selected from a larger sample of empirical data of fifteen women of Indian, Pakistani and African heritages who had formed intimate relationship with a partner, through dating. The narratives were chosen because the women had been coerced into marriage and as case studies help us to “understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to your case.” (Yin, 2018, 15). This provided a more nuanced and deeper understanding of forced marriage in the ways in which South Asian women can experience gradations of choice, coercion, power, and pressure. The authors acknowledge that three participant narratives cannot explain and represent the entirety of South Asian women’s experiences of forming intimate relationships. However, Yin (2013, 327) explains how empirical findings can be used “to explain the gaps and weaknesses in [the] literature”. By using BFT and intersectionality, this paper adds new knowledge to the conceptualisation of forced marriage by analysing how gendered power dynamics thwart South Asian women’s autonomy in making choices in intimate relationships. These three women have been chosen because their experiences best demonstrate the transition from dating their chosen partners to experiences of entrapment and conflict of forced marriage.

The following presents the stories of three women who took part in this research. Pseudonyms have been used to conceal the identities of the women for their safety. These three participants have been selected to best reflect the women in the cohort of this research.

5.2.1. Krishna

Krishna was 45 years of age. She was of Indian heritage and of the Hindu faith. She came to the UK when she was sixteen years old. Her father died when she was six years old and within three weeks after his death, Krishna was sexually abused by a male relative. The sexual abuse continued for eight years. Her mother was emotionally abused by Krishna’s paternal extended family. Krishna’s first marriage was an arranged marriage to a man with the same ethnicity and faith. The marriage took place in the UK when she was twenty-four years old. Her husband was emotionally, financially, physically, and sexually abusive towards her. Her mother-in-law and brother-in-law also emotionally abused her. After her husband tried to set fire to her duvet as she lay asleep, Krishna left him and filed for divorce, nearly three years after they were married. He continued to stalk, harass, and physically attack her in public.

Krishna’s second marriage to a US citizen took place seven months after the divorce from her first husband. As with the first marriage, the emotional, sexual, physical, and financial abuse started on the wedding night. She moved to the US two months after the wedding and was in this marriage for eight years. They had two children. After her husband tried to drug her and escalated the violence and abuse towards her, Krishna feared for her life. She left the marriage with their children and filed for a restraining order on him and a divorce. As with the first husband, he stalked and harassed her and the children. He fought her through all the courts, for custody of the children. The divorce was finalised in 2010. Krishna now lives in the UK, a single parent with her children, and is a full-time carer for one of her children.

5.2.2. Parveen

Parveen is a fifty-five-year-old woman of Pakistani heritage. Although raised as a practising Muslim, she follows no faith. Parveen has a professional role in the education sector. At the age of fourteen her father passed away. Three years later, she started dating her mother’s driving instructor, who was eight years her senior and of the same ethnicity and faith. Their relationship became public when they were spotted together by a community member. Both sets of families met with Parveen and her boyfriend. The male members of her boyfriend’s family pressed upon Parveen’s mother the importance of saving the honour of

both families within the community. Thus, his parents and Parveen’s mother gave Parveen and her boyfriend an ultimatum to marry, essentially closing down their options to continue dating or to end their relationship. The domestic violence started as soon as they were married. Parveen was physically assaulted, verbally abused, and raped repeatedly by her husband. He forbade her to see her family. Despite completing her A-levels, Parveen’s husband refused to allow her to study further and locked her in the home all day with no access to money whilst he went out to work.

When their son was four months old, her husband threatened to harm their baby if Parveen did not have sex with him. She relented. The next day she escaped the marital home with her son and went to stay with her sister. To prevent her husband from finding her and the baby, Parveen moved to a different part of the country. During the train journey, she sat next to a university lecturer. Their conversation influenced her to go to university. She was housed in a council house and enrolled and completed a teaching degree. She then became a teacher and raised her son. She divorced her husband but lived in fear of him finding them and abducting her son. As well as her son from her first marriage, Parveen has a daughter with her current partner, who is a white British male. She lives with him and their teenage daughter.

5.2.3. Gurpreet

Gurpreet is a fifty-four-year-old woman of Indian Sikh heritage. She was born in the UK and is the eldest sibling, with four younger brothers. She had a professional role in the public sector. At the age of fourteen she began dating a school friend who was of the same religion, ethnicity, and caste. Their relationship continued for three years, and was known to his family, whom she would visit, but unknown to her parents. When Gurpreet was seventeen, her partner went to university in a different city and her plan was to finish her A-levels and study for a degree, following her boyfriend to university. It was then that her boyfriend’s mother suggested that they should get married with increasing pressure. Giving in to the continued pressure from her boyfriend’s mother, Gurpreet felt she had no option but to tell her parents. They refused consent to the marriage and did not support her as she had been dating her boyfriend and so transgressing accepted norms of arranged marriage. Furthermore, they had no knowledge of this whilst her boyfriend’s parents did, adding further to their sense of shame. Through increased pressure from her future mother-in-law and without her parents’ knowledge, she and her boyfriend got married in a civil ceremony, with only his family present. Gurpreet informed her parents afterwards and they agreed to arrange the Sikh wedding ceremony. After the ceremony, she moved to live with her husband, whilst he was still a student at university.

Gurpreet took up employment and never attended university. She and her husband had three children together and are still married after 36 years. She experienced emotional abuse from her family and her husband’s family.

5.3. The findings

5.3.1. Dating – The capacity to make choices

Women explained their socialisation into arranged marriages but at the same time felt there were avenues of autonomy in choosing their own partners.

I suppose although I knew about arranged marriages I think we also had this idea from my dad that we would—actually we would be allowed to choose our own partners but it was never really explained how we would do this because we weren’t allowed to go out with anyone, of course...we never really kind of went into detail of it. – Parveen.

I was really confused. I couldn’t understand it. You know, you were giving me one message and all of a sudden you were saying “You can’t go down that route” and he [her father] wasn’t you know, there

was none of this about “oh, you can marry him”. It was more about “we’re gonna choose. – Gurpreet.

These mixed messages, from their fathers in particular, confused both Parveen and Gurpreet. Their impression that they would have autonomy in choice of partner did not materialise when faced with the reality.

Krishna describes the conversation she had with her mother.

a lot of arranged marriage they’ve been forced into and you don’t really get choice but in my, in my situation my mom has always given me a choice. She wanted me to live life the way I wanted to live and even though she did say to me in the past, she goes “Krishna find somebody that you that you like and I don’t mind, erm, you know if you want to marry that person” - Krishna.

Krishna explains coercion into forced marriage where there is no choice. Krishna’s mother, a single parent, actively suggests to Krishna that she would be supportive of Krishna choosing her own partner. There are no mixed messages.

The participants described how the relationships came about and how they felt when they first started dating or were attracted to their partners.

what happened for me is how I chose my, my husband, it was when I, when you put in inverted commas around choice was. That when I was about seventeen, I went out with a Pakistani man.—he asked me out, secretly of course. - Parveen.

Parveen immediately refers to the notion of choice. The secrecy of meeting him is a given contradicting her impression that she would be allowed to choose her partner.

Gurpreet met her husband at the age of fifteen at school.

So [I] met my husband; just purely group of friends hanging around and a lot of the influence from East African Asian women who were much more liberal in, in what they did, the way they behaved ... they used to bring together groups of boys and girls ... after a little while, I noticed my husband, who is now my husband - Gurpreet.

The introduction facilitated by her peers who “were much more liberal”, suggests Gurpreet may not have had a similar opportunity otherwise.

Women described their feelings of excitement and euphoria in their attraction to their partners.

‘I was seventeen and he had a car (laughs), just fancying him you know. It was exciting to go out with an older man. Remember I’d just lost my father, though, you know partly looking back that was the attraction...somebody older and I had no intention to marry him, at all. We were just having fun.’ – Parveen.

Dating an older man was thrilling. Parveen was enjoying spending time with him. She points out he was an “older man”. The attraction was precisely in reaction to the loss of her father. There was no other older male role model in her family that she could relate to. Her father’s loss created a huge hole in Parveen’s life. He was no longer there for her to spend time with nor to confide in and this man was.

Gurpreet also found excitement in the attention she was receiving.

“I must have been about fifteen then and wherever I was, wherever he, us two were in the same sort of area at school, I could see these eyes just following me. And I was sort of thinking ‘Oh my God! What’s happening here?’ That would have been a first for me and our friendship sort of grew from there really, yeah, yeah. (pause).” - Gurpreet.

It was also the first time Gurpreet had sensed she was the focus of intimate attraction, and it took her by surprise because it was something she had not experienced before. The inexperience of the situation is evident.

For both women, being intimate with a person was a new experience and having a relationship, outside of existing family relations with parents, siblings etc. was exciting. They emphasise their young age and how it was the first time they were the focus of intimate attraction.

Krishna also appreciated the attention and interest she received but for very different reasons. Through questions posed to her and it instilled confidence in her partner.

‘He wanted to know everything about my life and I said because I didn’t have no support after what I went through, the domestic violence and you know trusting people and all that stuff, I thought everybody’s nice around here, so I said everything what I went through. I poured my heart out.’ – Krishna.

Krishna had complete attention from her partner who made her his focus. She in turn placed trust in him and so confided about the domestic violence she experienced in her first marriage. The emotional attachment and recovery were of paramount importance to Krishna.

At the time of dating, all three women believed their decisions were autonomous, but recognised how they were accommodated within the boundaries and constraints of systems of patriarchal order which is why they dated in secrecy.

5.3.2. *The net is cast – actions and decisions of others*

As the women became more familiar with their partners and their partners’ families, the context of their situation became clear. The women describe the situation they found themselves in and responses from those closest to them.

Gurpreet describes her mother-in-law’s motivation as well as her concerns regarding the relationship between Gurpreet and her boyfriend.

‘his mum was of the view that she’s got one son whose already gone to university and is living with a white girl. I don’t want another son of mine to go and live with a white girl so he had to make a commitment to get married after his first year before she’d let him go.’ Gurpreet.

Gurpreet’s partner promised his mother that he would not follow in his brother’s footsteps. Gurpreet implies these discussions took place in her absence. Her mother-in-law’s motivation for their relationship to become more cemented than merely dating is evident as she does not want him to live with or marry a white woman. So, it is better that he marries Gurpreet, someone she knows, and can also assert authority over, than risk him marrying someone who may be more difficult to control because she is from a different background.

this is where it all sort of gets a bit (pause) people don’t know this (laughs) but it gets a bit erm more traumatic...So that was the time when he, he [Gurpreet’s father] was saying to me ‘You know, this ain’t gonna happen.’ So err in the end my mother-in-law said to me, she said ‘you’re gonna have to leave home. It’s the only way it’s gonna happen.’ - Gurpreet.

Gurpreet’s mother-in-law’s pressure and power over Gurpreet is at a cost - “it gets even more traumatic”. How her mother-in-law was able to get her to leave her parental home and the distress it caused her was something she had kept secret.

Conversations also took place between family members in Parveen’s case. Whilst on a date, Parveen and her partner were seen by a member of their community, which meant their intimate relationship was now public knowledge. Due to the established social practices of monitoring young people’s behaviour, the community member informed her partner’s family. His family then visited Parveen’s mother to force a marriage between Parveen and her partner.

...it was just total scandal...I was gonna go to university. I was kind of messing around, just like enjoying having an older—the attention of an older man. He was probably just enjoying a really rebellious

young girl. 'I don't think it would have gone anywhere except we were seen and then there was this massive ultimatum. I said to you I wasn't getting on with my mother anyway.' – Parveen.

This was a totally unexpected situation for Parveen. She had at no time considered the demands placed on her (and her partner) especially the consequences if they were not met. Parveen's strained relationship with her mother, as well as grieving for her father, also were influences adding to the complexity in making decisions.

Others' actions also impacted on Krishna whilst she was dating.

"they put a ring on me saying 'Engaged' and I was in like, I was in a complete shock saying 'Why is the ring going on at the moment' and because it was a lot of people around, I couldn't say anything cos I've always known I'm a person who doesn't stand up for herself." Krishna.

Krishna's astonishment was evident when her partner's family 'announced' her engagement. She did not feel that she could go against their actions especially as a public announcement is a form of social pressure making it difficult for Krishna to act against others' wishes and in her own interests led them onto the path to forced marriage.

I felt I had no say in and because being in that controlling situation you let other people make a decision. In this situation his mom and his sister made a decision for me and I couldn't say anything for myself and err you live in that erm world that you're not capable of making your own decision. It's okay for others to make a decision for you and that's how I, that's how I always lived. Erm then erm he come, he comes here— Krishna.

5.3.3. Entrapment

Women described the situation they found themselves in as entrapment.

'...but I almost I think I got trapped in a sense because I'd fallen with this guy which I was happy to be friends with him forever if need be but did I really wanna get married, maybe not? - Gurpreet.

Gurpreet had not made any long-term plans to be with her boyfriend. She was not sure if she wanted to marry him. She was driven into a corner. She was not sure, but others were making firm plans.

And because his family were already in it, they're already starting making decisions for you ... my mother-in-law said, "You've got to get married before you go to university" and so that was the pressure on me to tell my parents. And I think that was probably the worst time of my life really (laughs) in many respects.' – Gurpreet.

After persuading Gurpreet to leave home, her mother-in-law raises the stakes by pressuring her to get married. Clearly asserting her dominance as the mother-in-law. Similarly for Parveen others were also making the decisions.

...his family and my family sat down and said "Right this is a dreadful scandal. You must get married" and I thought "Ooh, why not?" (pause) I, I mean looking back I think we were both equally trapped. – Parveen.

Parveen too was under duress. Faced with this situation where she is being instructed to get married, she expresses a qualified approval "why not?" but in later years re-evaluates what happened.

I didn't have any choice, not really because erm—I remember at the time actually thinking "did I?" It was like "you've gotta stop seeing each other." So when you're seventeen and you fancy that you're in love and the alternative is having a year of not good times, you think "well, yeah I'll get married". - Parveen.

At the time Parveen questioned whether she actually had a choice. Again, given the influence from families and her relationship with her

mother she agreed to marry him. Krishna had similar experiences and conclusions.

'I felt I had no say in and because being in that controlling situation you let other people make a decision. In this situation his mom and his sister made a decision for me and I couldn't say anything for myself and err you live in that erm world that you're not capable of making your own decision.' – Krishna.

Krishna clearly sees the coercion and how women are making the decisions. At the same time, she does not have the self-belief to make her own decisions. However, she does feel something is awry.

erm I said "yes" to this guy...somehow I knew something wasn't right and I couldn't work it out... and I wasn't expecting anything to happen quickly like that because I wasn't sure myself what I wanted erm, or where my life was going, ... then within few weeks, they decided to have engagement and I felt I had no say in even though I had a choice - Krishna.

The fast pace of events outmanoeuvred Krishna. Like the others she had doubts about her partner and was unsure of what her next moves in life were. She maintained she had a choice but in reality, she was not being consulted.

All three participants had doubts about whether they wanted to marry their partners but were coerced into marriage by their family members. The participants were trapped and so considered strategies to maximise autonomy, within the constraints of the patriarchal situation they faced. Women members of the family were involved in entrapping all the participants.

5.3.4. Reflections – complexities

By revisiting their decisions to marry the person they were dating, the women conveyed the multiple interacting constraints that influenced their decisions.

Parveen works through the reasons for her consenting to the marriage.

'I'd chosen him in that I've been with him hadn't I? So, it felt like, you know, it was a terrible mistake that I had made. So, I think I didn't — at the time I don't think I thought I'd been coerced in any way. I think, I thought I think, I took it as well I chose him. Well you know I did and I didn't but I did. Erm, though, yes, it made it much, much worse, I think because you know it had been my decision and I and I realised that I had made a terrible mistake.' – Parveen.

Parveen reveals how choosing to marry her partner was not straightforward. She had agreed to marry him but contradicted that recognising she was forced into making this decision and later realising the consequences for her.

She elaborates further.

I don't think mine was forced. I don't think it was arranged but it was, it was absolutely coerced...if we'd just been left to ourselves, after about a couple of weeks I think I would have realised he was completely like not suitable for me... It's not forced but it's actually about being able to say no. - Parveen.

Parveen connects forced marriage with arrange marriage. As she had been dating her partner, she concludes her marriage was coerced because she did not have the option to refuse. Krishna also provides a reflection on how choice played a part in her decision making but also the circumstances behind that led to that decision.

...so I had the choice but I made that choice. I wish I didn't now. In the past I wish, I wish I opened up how I felt and I wish I looked out for my happiness as well...not because I liked him because it's just that I think—when people are going through domestic violence, they don't realise that, that erm trusting is a huge...you know that you don't trust people quickly like you become vulnerable. - Krishna.

It was important to Krishna that she could trust him because of her past experiences of domestic violence. It played a huge role in her decision to marry her partner and she highlights her own vulnerability.

my mom did give me a choice, it's up to you find a boyfriend and I don't mind you but ... I didn't wanna have a boyfriend or anything. Or maybe it's to do with the erm my past, whether I was avoiding that part of it, the childhood experience I had. The abuse side of it ... because deep down I didn't want to get married. I didn't want—I didn't want any, anybody in my life. - Krishna.

Krishna's vulnerability shows when she reveals the impact of her childhood experiences of sexual abuse and her innermost feelings of not wanting to get married at all because marriage involves sexual intimacy. Gurpreet also dissects her experiences.

You know, everybody's sad about it. Having to put on a face in the community, making up stories about what actually happened...I took the blame and it was like you couldn't get out of that... that trapped feeling and erm that's the only way I can describe it. - Gurpreet.

Gurpreet felt her family held her responsible for having to give false accounts of events – a huge burden to bear and one that left her feeling she could not escape.

'I think what I was saying is if I didn't, if I didn't have the pressures on that I did, probably wouldn't have got married then. Might, might have carried on being friends or living to- well we wouldn't have been able to live together but erm, erm you know I would have wanted to have done my degree and then if it was him still, then get married to him.' – Gurpreet.

Gurpreet was unsure if her relationship with her partner would have continued had she not had the pressures to conform. Her priority was to go to university, which was never realised.

As older women all three provide a perspective that considers their understanding of their agency in making decisions to marry but also recognising the role other people played and the circumstances that influenced their decisions. All three women had doubts about marrying their partners. Parveen and Gurpreet did not see the relationship as a commitment to the long-term obligation to marry. Their ambition to go to university was a greater priority. They all recognised the coercion they experienced into making the decisions whilst at the same time viewing choice through the lens of dating. The lifelong hidden trauma of sexual abuse continues to engulf Krishna and influences her decisions because of her vulnerability.

What is apparent from Parveen's comments is that, whilst dating and without her mother's knowledge, she believed her decision was autonomous because she had "chosen him". When both his and her families knew of their relationship and were forcefully telling her to marry her partner or risk bringing shame onto the family, she agreed. Over time, her reflections led to a sense of conflicting values and expectations; "I did and I didn't, but I did". As an older woman, Parveen had come to realise that she had in fact been coerced into marrying him. Parveen resisted her violent husband and hence by implication her forced marriage to him, by escaping with her child. She became a teacher and lived a happy family life with her current partner and their daughter. She was in contact with her family.

The themes of entrapment and coercion frame the women's experiences of transgressing social norms and forming intimate relationships. Family members, in-laws and community members' gendered expectations shaped the women's lives and influenced their decision-making at all stages of the relationships: before, during the relationship, (dating or in marriage), and when their intimate relationships ended.

6. Discussion – the gradations of choice, agency, consent, and coercion

All three women faced conflicting and divided loyalties. In parallel, acting on their own choices of intimate partner was perceived as a route to escape family control and cultural values that imposed gendered behaviours and a way of life that constrained gender equality (Chantler et al., 2018).

At the time of dating, all three participants believed they were making independent choices. Even though the women had consented to dating but not to marriage, the socialisation into arranged marriage and burden on women to assert gendered norms can create tensions for women (Siddiqui, 2013). Personal trauma such as the loss of a parent, transgressing codes of honour and past experiences of violence and sexual abuse shaped women's agency. By dating, the women were not only transgressing gendered social norms but also repudiating the most sacred value, that is family honour (Sen, 2005). Dating and choosing one's own partner outside of arranged marriage is one such violation of family honour (Siddiqui, 2005). Vocalising domestic violence especially in a previous marriage subverts patriarchal forces of dutiful wife. These pressures which the women faced, formed the backdrop to choose and consent in their decision making.

Kandiyoti (1988)'s work on patriarchal bargain illuminates women's passive resistance by dating their partners in secrecy. The powerful influences on the women shaped their gendered subjectivity. Faced with families pressurising them, the community knowledge of their relationships, and their own trauma, they strategized within these constraints. It was an accommodation within the systems of patriarchy and gendered expectations. It sheds light on new ways of defining and understanding forced marriage.

In order to uphold and assert gender roles and expectations, women's behaviours are monitored within the community (Gill & Brah, 2014). Entering intimate relationships outside of an arranged marriage can lead to consequences such as ostracism from family and community (Tonsing & Barn, 2017; Toor, 2009). It is not necessarily the dating itself that leads to consequences for the women but the *discovery* of the breaching of social norms. When extended family and community members discover the transgression and fear it becoming public knowledge or wish to reassert family honour due to some prior misdemeanour, parents' priority is then to uphold family and community honour, which is achieved through coercing women's behaviour (Gill & Brah, 2014). Gendered norms, supported by socialisation of and upholding honour and shame dictate that women can be sexually intimate with only one partner (Siddiqui, 2013; Gill & Brah, 2014). The women's choice and consent diminish as their families begin to influence decision-making. Such "articulated and unarticulated constraints" reflect gender inequalities and the coercive measures that impinge on women's agency to marry or not, who they wish to marry and when they wish to marry (Gill & Anitha, 2011).

Cultural norms dictate that dating reflects an automatic commitment to marriage (Gill & Brah, 2014) that is intrinsic coercion, as the women had not intended, or wanted to marry. Increasingly severe strategies to force marriage were employed by the families to entrap the women and their partners (Siddiqui, 2013), limiting, or even bankrupting women's autonomy (Mahmood, 2005). That said, the male partners were also entrapped, and this is an area that requires further research as it was not considered within scope of this study. Parveen, Krishna, and Gurpreet all felt ensnared as they were coerced into acquiescing to forced marriages to please not only their families but also their partner's families (Wilson, 2006). The women's sense of entrapment was a manifestation of coercion, power, and patriarchy, adding a further layer of understanding of forced marriages. How women navigated control from family members, the shame of violating social norms and their own resistance are intricate threads that show the dynamic and fluid nature of how forced marriages can occur.

Thus, paradoxically the women conformed to the very social

expectation that they had originally rejected and acted against; that is, dating *became* a long-term commitment, namely marriage. When faced with familial pressures and obligations to fulfil expected gender roles, the women ended up serving the interests of family and in-laws and not necessarily their own. Conformity to marriage was influenced by both implicit and explicit coercion from parents and future in-laws, which dissipated the women's autonomy of choice and consent which were replaced with coercion.

6.1. Intersectional approach

The simultaneous conflicting values and expectations of choice, consent, coercion and power reflect the complicated, multi-layered, fluid and subtle gendered coercive forces at work. Parveen's statement "I did and I didn't, but I did" reflects the fine line along the continuum from choice and consent to coercion. By dating, Parveen chose her partner. Faced with adults who had power over her, she acquiesced to marrying her boyfriend which she would not have considered otherwise, essentially closing down her choices (Patel, 2003). Her interactions were all within the family and community with no opportunities to access appropriate services.

The intersections of age, gender, culture and poverty are at play here. A young single woman, who is still at school, under eighteen years of age, beholden to honour and shame and not respected as an individual with rights within her family, and with no independent financial means to support herself, was coerced into marrying her boyfriend and lost her access to a university education. "I did and I didn't, but I did" reflects an interpretation of the intricate threads of agency within choice. By exercising choice within the web of defiance of social and gendered norms, are not a simple binary subordination versus resistance equations (Mahmood, 2005) but are embedded in the intersectional nature of constraints both within and outside of the family. By agreeing to marry, the women maximised their autonomy as best they could (Kandiyoti, 1988). Agreeing to marry to avoid conflict in family relations and as adolescent girls there were not many options available to openly resist. Such experiences bring to light new interpretations of forced marriages not included within current discourses.

Gurpreet's mother-in-law's priority was for Gurpreet to marry her son and not for Gurpreet's own ambitions. If Gurpreet had the opportunity to fulfil her intention to go to university, her life may have taken a different path. Parveen's family also prioritised marriage over her education which stymied employment opportunities. Krishna referred to lack of support in her past experiences of domestic violence. Her marital status as a divorcee reflects how oppression affects all aspects of a woman's life (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Also limited access to material wealth or employment reduced the women's ability to exit their situations. They did not have the networks to access support and safety from domestic abuse. They could not approach teaching professionals at school due to pressures they felt from their families but also the teachers' lack of awareness of what Parveen and Gurpreet may have been going through. It is the cumulative effect of the intersections of women's access to services, to education, especially as children, and to independent financial opportunities, that reflect the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, culture, class, socio-economic status, and age that change women's lives forever (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

In addition, the pressures that the women faced came from other women in their families (Alpin, 2019; Bates, 2018): the future mothers-in-law, as well as mothers in Parveen's and Gurpreet's experiences and for Krishna, her future husband's sister. These women held power (relative to the men in the families) over the participants. The perpetrators inflicted gender-based violence on the participants *before* they were married *and together* with the partners the victims were intimately connected with. Such lived realities show the hierarchies of power at the intersections of multiple social categories; women have less power over the men in the family but power over other women which increases with age and marital status. Intersection of gender and age shape women's

interactions within their families. Women participants found women family members exerted patriarchal power over them as older members of the family and as mothers or mothers-in-law, due to age and status hierarchy within the family (Alpin, 2019; Bates, 2018). With sons dating, it robs mothers-in-law of power and respectability in a way having a son marry through an arranged marriage does not (Kandiyoti, 1988). Mothers-in-law thus aid the patriarchal order (Kandiyoti, 1988). So in Gurpreet's example her partner's mother controlled and coerced Gurpreet as it was in her interest that Gurpreet married her son. Here is a unique interpretation of forced marriage, where the future mother-in-law can engineer a forced marriage involving her future daughter-in-law. Forced marriage is an exemplification of the 'alliance' over situated knowledge of honour and shame amongst women that influence coercive behaviour towards younger women victims into agreeing to marriage and thus preserving and serving the patriarchal order.

The women's narratives show the transition from choice and consent in the act of dating to entrapment, manifested as forced marriage through coercive pressures. Choosing to initiate intimate relationships can present as agentic autonomous acts outside of the so-called respectable arranged marriage norms prevalent in these communities. Closer analysis of the experiences of all three women shows that their experiences were still mediated along a continuum towards forced marriage (Kallivayalil, 2010), where pressures to assert cultural values resulted in forced marriage (Wilson, 2006).

7. Conclusions

Forced marriage has been examined in the context of women's experiences of marriage where they have chosen their own partners through secret dating. Additionally forced marriage is conceptualised in relation to third-party pressure that vitiates consent both in relation to the timing of the marriage and crucially, the choice of partner. The analysis of the narratives offer new insights and address gaps in literature in relation to a less explored dimension of the problem of forced marriage.

This paper has added to scholarship on South Asian women's experiences of dating. More importantly, it sheds new light on the dynamic nature of forced marriage. This paper has gone further than the usual debates and discourses that centre on forced marriage in relation to arranged marriage. It has done this by showing how the empirical findings demonstrate how women who dated their partners, without any long-term commitment to marriage, could still be forced into marriage. It is at the point where parents and family members feel the need to uphold family honour that interventions occur, which results in the women (and their chosen partners) forced into marriage. Furthermore, older generations of women in the family, that is mothers and mothers-in-law impose social conventions of patriarchy on their sons, their son's girlfriends as well as their daughters, enabling them to maintain power and status in the family.

This article has illustrated how the intersections of the women's experiences of lack of access to services, to education, and employment; their ages; marital status as a divorcee; and of the gendered expectations on them, all serve to create constraints on women's lives and their decision making. The women themselves were young, without financial means, victims of gendered violence, had ambitions in their lives and where powerful patriarchal influences shaped their gendered subjectivity.

What may seem to be women to be turning their backs on their autonomy of choice and colluding with their own oppression requires an understanding of the intersections of gendered experiences of the dynamics of power, choice, coercion, consent, violence, and subjugation within familial and intimate partner relationships.

To capture the diversity of relationships that include marriages and other long-term intimate relationships, the focus for future research into South Asian women forming intimate relationships requires the centring of women's experiences of entering intimate relationships rather than

specific marriage practices. By turning attention to the gradations of choice, coercion, and consent in South Asian women's experiences of forming intimate relationships, insight can be obtained into the workings of entrapment and conflict. By focussing on women's experiences, the extent of dynamic nature of forced marriages begins to be appreciated.

This offers the opportunity for further research and analysis, which is not restricted to the arranged marriage-forced marriage lens but instead explores other possible trajectories not hitherto considered, but present, in South Asian women's experiences of forming intimate relationships. Although this research is set in the UK, it warrants further work in other countries on other South Asian diasporic experiences of entering intimate relationships. Although this paper deals with South Asian women's experiences of choosing intimate partners and how choice and consent can be dissipated to result in forced marriage, an additional area for further study would be an exploration of women's parallel experiences of both intimate partner and familial violence. This would particularly benefit policy and practice regarding domestic violence to include service provision women who are experiencing forced marriage in ways not considered before.

8. Further research

We have acknowledged the small sample size in this paper, but we believe the richness of the data enabled an analysis of the voices of the participants to highlight an area not greatly reflected in scholarship. Our close analysis of the narratives present deeper insights and address gaps in scholarship in relation to a less explored dimension of forced marriage. It is up to us as researchers to look beyond the covers of what constitutes a forced marriage and extend our lens to explore and examine aspects of women's lives which go beyond the arranged/forced marriage continuum. This research did not cover the impact on the partners of the women who may also have felt they had been coerced into marriage. An area of further work is to investigate men's experiences of forced marriage and in particular where they were forced into marrying the person they had been dating.

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