

Escaping the Arrangement

Forced Marriages in European Muslim Diasporic Films

Abstract

While the issue of forced and arranged marriages is rarely explored by scholars of family sociology in Islamic contexts and seldom occupies a central position in the cinemas of Muslim-majority countries, it appears surprisingly often in European diasporic films portraying Muslim-background migrant characters. The first part of this article outlines key studies on the contested yet persistent practice of arranged marriages in Islam. It is followed by an examination of the recurring plot structure in films addressing the topic. Regardless of whether these films adopt a comedic or dramatic tone and whether they are produced exclusively in Europe or co-produced with countries outside Europe (such as Tunisia, Pakistan, or Turkey), young male and female protagonists consistently reject the notion of arranged marriage. Four films are subject to detailed narrative and genre analysis: *EAST IS EAST* (Damien O'Donnell, UK 1999), *AE FOND KISS ...* (Ken Loach, UK 2004), *VINGAR AV GLAS* (*WINGS OF GLASS*, Reza Bagher, SE 2000), and *NOCES* (*A WEDDING*, Stephan Streker, BE 2016). Ultimately, all these films discredit the practice of arranged and forced marriages, often linking it to the collapse of paternal authority. They also highlight the unequal gender dynamics at play, showing that refusing an arranged marriage tends to carry far greater risks and consequences for women than for men.

Keywords

European Cinema, Islam and Culture, Muslims in Motion Pictures, Religion in Motion Pictures, *EAST IS EAST* (Damien O'Donnell, UK 1999), *AE FOND KISS ...* (Ken Loach, UK 2004), *VINGAR AV GLAS* (*WINGS OF GLASS*, Reza Bagher, SE 2000), and *NOCES* (*A WEDDING*, Stephan Streker, BE 2016)

Biography

Adam Domalewski holds a PhD in Arts, is a graduate of film and theater studies, and is an Assistant Professor at the Film, Media and Audiovisual Arts Institute at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań (Poland). His research interests include the intersection of film and religion, film comedy, and twenty-first-century European cinema, especially works addressing issues of migration and diaspora. Domalewski is co-author (with Artur Skweres) of the book *Homo Viator in Contemporary European Comedy Movies* (2025).

Forced and arranged marriages serve as central themes, narrative turning points, and primary sources of intergenerational conflict in many European diasporic films, including *EAST IS EAST* (Damien O'Donnell, UK 1999), *AE FOND KISS...* (Ken Loach, UK 2004), *VINGAR AV GLAS* (*WINGS OF GLASS*, Reza Bagher, SE 2000), *JALLA! JALLA!* (*THE BEST MAN'S WEDDING*, Josef Fares, SE 2000),¹ *FARSAN* (Josef Fares, SE 2010), *HVA VIL FOLK SI* (*WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY*, Iram Haq, NO 2017), *SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI!* (*HUSH HUSH BABY*, Albert ter Heerdt, NL 2004), *TURQUAZE* (Kadir Balci, BE 2010), *NOCES* (*A WEDDING*, Stephan Streker, BE 2016), *POUR VIVRE HEUREUX* (*FOR A HAPPY LIFE*, Salima Glamine / Dimitri Linder, BE 2018), *MUSTANG* (Deniz Gamze Ergüven, FR/DE/TR 2015), and *INHEBBEK HEDI* (*HEDI*, Mohamed Ben Attia, TN/FR/BE 2016). I argue that in European feature films addressing issues related to Islam, one of the most frequently recurring motifs (at least since 1989) is the predicament of a young Muslim man or woman concerning marriage. A particularly significant aspect of this theme is the issue of arranged and forced marriages, which appears surprisingly often in European diasporic films. The first part of the article outlines key studies on the contested yet persistent practice of arranged and forced marriages within Islamic contexts. The second part then examines the recurring plot structure in films addressing the topic on the example of four movies from the above list. The analyzed films employ diverse generic frameworks to depict arranged marriages, ranging from family melodrama and coming-of-age dramedy to cinematic tragedy. Despite these variations in genre, their overall plot structure remains strikingly similar. My goal is to reconstruct this common structure and, in the conclusion, to reflect on what these structural patterns may reveal.

Sociological Perspectives on Arranged and Forced Marriages in Muslim Families

The issue of arranged marriages neither constitutes the primary focus of orientalist research on family sociology in Islam, nor – according to available film studies – has a prominent place in the cinemas of Muslim-majority countries. Scholars analyzing the intersection of Islamic religion, the Quran, women's status, and family law generally focus on three key issues: the

1 This migrant comedy film portrays an attempt to arrange a marriage within a Lebanese-Swedish family whose members are Christians.

legitimacy of divorce, the permissibility of polygamy, and gender equality. In a 1962 article entitled *The Reform in Family Laws in the Muslim World*, Muhammad Rashid Feroze examined mid-20th-century family law reforms in Pakistan, Egypt, and Tunisia that have adapted the law to Western models.² Feroze highlighted the progress made by legislators in expanding women's rights, such as enabling Muslim women to obtain judicial divorces³ and restricting polygamous marriages, particularly those entered into without the consent of the first wife.⁴ In Egypt, a minimum age for marriage was also established – fifteen for women and eighteen for men. During the same period, in the late 1950s, several Muslim-majority countries, including Egypt and Pakistan, granted women the right to vote.⁵ Moreover, these nations introduced detailed legal provisions concerning *mahr*, the mandatory financial gift from husband to wife that is an inseparable part of the institution of marriage in Islam. However, Feroze's study made only brief mention of forced marriages, specifically in the context of women in Pakistan being married off without their consent due to financial gains for their families, particularly their fathers.⁶ He cited a government commission report that unequivocally condemned the practice of selling daughters and called for strict legal action against those responsible.

In 2005 Asghar Ali Engineer presented a significantly different perspective on forced marriages, writing from an internal Muslim standpoint on women and family in Islam. His main objective in *The Quran, Women, and Modern Society* is a meticulous analysis of core practices and thought patterns deemed universally binding in Sharia law, re-examining them in light of their original Quranic formulation. Engineer asserts that while the source – the Quran – is divine, its interpretation remains human and “stands in need of change”.⁷ He argues that Sharia should not be considered a closed system, just as it was not perceived as such in the early days of Islam, including by the Prophet himself. Considering the socio-cultural context in which the Quran was

2 Feroze 2003, 1–21.

3 In Pakistan, under an act of 1939, women were granted the right to seek divorce in strictly specified cases of neglect and misconduct by their husbands, a groundbreaking development in the legislation of the Indian subcontinent. Feroze 2003, 2.

4 In Tunisia, however, polygamous marriage was banned and could be punished with imprisonment. Feroze 2003, 16.

5 Moghadam/Mitra 2014, 163–164.

6 Feroze 2003, 6.

7 Engineer 2005, 40.

revealed and subsequently interpreted,⁸ Engineer suggests re-evaluating its verses, particularly those concerning women. He advocates suspending long-standing interpretations that assert the supposed inferiority of women in the Quran, as many revolutionary Quranic passages granted both genders relatively comparable rights for their time, significantly elevating the status of women within the family and society.⁹ By referencing specific Quranic passages and analyzing them in their historical context, Engineer refutes various discriminatory interpretations purportedly derived from the Quran, such as the notion that a woman's testimony is worth only half that of a man. His work thus encourages a revision of dominant readings and representations of Quranic teachings.

Despite his theological approach, which prioritizes scriptural exegesis over sociological analysis, Engineer attributes the disadvantages faced by Muslim women primarily to pervasive patriarchy. A useful complement to his work is Wiebke Walther's article "*The Situation of Women in Islamic Countries*", published in 2010 in the comprehensive study *Islam in the World Today* by a team of German scholars.¹⁰ Walther addresses forced marriages twice, while also distinguishing them from arranged marriages. She identifies the former as a legacy of the custom known as *jabr*, which granted fathers or guardians the right to compel underage daughters into marriage. Walther notes that this practice was outlawed in Middle Eastern countries during the 1960s and 1970s, though cases of forced marriages have since been recorded in Europe, particularly among Turkish immigrant communities in Germany. According to Walther, such cases primarily occurred in impoverished urban families and rural communities and were driven by the desire to ensure the daughters' financial security and maintain "autochthonous traditions".¹¹

Similar factors – low social status and limited education – also seem to contribute to the practice of arranged marriages. Walther describes them as common in Muslim families, where parents with their daughter's consent seek out a "socially acceptable and amicable husband".¹² While women often play a crucial role in the matchmaking process, the negotiation phase

8 It was intended for pre-Islamic Arab communities, which were entirely dominated by men. Engineer 2005, 26–30.

9 Engineer 2005, 47, 181.

10 Walther 2010, 619–681.

11 Walther 2010, 653.

12 Walther 2010, 665.

is strictly a male domain – marriage contracts (often highly detailed) are arranged between the prospective groom, typically assisted by a cousin or friend, and the bride's male relatives. Financial stability remains a key criterion, to the extent that weddings are sometimes postponed for years while the groom attains the required economic status. The financial aspect is also closely linked to the common age gap between spouses, with grooms often significantly older than their brides.

These studies highlight that arranged and forced marriages in Islam are complex and ambiguous phenomena. On the one hand, they have been officially outlawed (in the case of forced marriages) or lack explicit legal sanction (in the case of arranged marriages), yet they remain present in Muslim cultural landscapes. Notably, they are somewhat marginalized within orientalist scholarship, even among those specializing in the sociology of the Muslim family, despite the significant influence of gender and feminist studies in this field. Furthermore, film studies suggest that similar neglect applies to cinematic representations of such marriages in Muslim-majority countries, as is indicated by research focusing on portrayals of Muslim women on screen.

Cinematic Portrayals of Arranged and Forced Marriages

Gönül Dönmez-Colin in *Women, Islam and Cinema* traces the evolution of female representation in the film industries of several Muslim-majority countries from their inception to the early 21st century. She examines the cinematic output of nations as diverse as Iran, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia, yet concludes that similar stereotypes, narrative patterns, and recurring themes have dominated these national cinemas for decades.¹³ According to Dönmez-Colin, the most common depictions include, on the one hand, the trope of the “fallen woman” and her moral transgressions – often intertwined with sexual violence as a form of punishment for dishonoring her family. On the other hand, there is an idealized vision of the “family woman”, a silent and self-sacrificing figure devoid of autonomy who exists solely for the well-being of her relatives. These portrayals were especially prevalent in rural melodramas. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that Muslim-majority film

13 Dönmez-Colin 2004, 13.

industries began to expand the range of female characters, introducing career-driven women and rebellious figures who to some extent broke free from rigid social norms. While these films addressed a variety of pressing social issues, Dönmez-Colin does not mention arranged or forced marriages as a significant theme.

However, in recent years the subject of arranged and forced marriages has finally been tackled in the cinemas of Muslim-majority countries, often through co-productions with western European nations. The most notable example is Deniz Gamze Ergüven's critically acclaimed debut film *MUSTANG*, which was nominated for an Academy Award. Though set in contemporary Turkey, the film was co-produced by France, Germany, and Qatar. Other noteworthy titles include the Tunisian film *HEDI*, produced with French-Belgian support, and *THE SYRIAN BRIDE*, an Israeli-French-German production that explores matrimonial themes against the backdrop of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Even before these developments, however, several European cinemas had already addressed the issue of arranged and forced marriages within Muslim immigrant families.

In this article, four films are subjected to detailed narrative and genre analysis: *EAST IS EAST*, *AE FOND KISS ...*, *VINGAR AV GLAS*, and *NOCES*. In the analyses, I use the terms "arranged marriage" and "forced marriage" interchangeably, as in each case the arranged marriage evolves into a forced one. However, it is important to acknowledge the distinct boundary between these two concepts in both Islamic and non-Islamic traditions. Arranged marriages are considered theologically and legally legitimate, provided they have the consent of both parties (usually children). In contrast, forced marriages, in which the consent of the individuals involved is disregarded, are widely condemned and usually legally prohibited. Nevertheless, the protagonists in these films invariably perceive the attempt to arrange their marriages as a form of coercion, albeit to varying degrees. As the films suggest, the practice of arranging marriages – especially when combined with parental pressure – leads to deep conflicts within Muslim families against the backdrop of contemporary Europe.

As I will show, the general plot structure remains the same: (1) the protagonist's family presents plans to arrange his/her marriage; (2) the first meeting with the prospective spouse; (3) the protagonist's rebellion and distancing from home; (4) attempts through negotiation or intimidation to persuade the protagonist to comply; (5) final confrontation with the family, where the protagonist continues to refuse the arranged marriage. In all four

films, the main characters, without exception, try to escape the mandate to marry someone of the same origin and religion. Ultimately, all these films discredit the practice of arranged and forced marriages, often linking it to the collapse of paternal authority. They also highlight the unequal gender dynamics at play, showing that for women refusing an arranged marriage tends to carry far greater risks and consequences.

Melodramatic Escapes from Marriages in EAST IS EAST (UK 1999) and AE FOND KISS ... (UK 2004)

My overview of films dealing with the subject of arranged and forced marriages begins with the well-known and critically acclaimed EAST IS EAST. This impactful film can serve as a reference point for later films on similar topics. Drawing on Thomas Elsaesser's findings (originally formulated in relation to Hollywood cinema), I read EAST IS EAST as a family melodrama. The depiction of the struggles faced by a Pakistani family in England through a series of contrasts, the focus on the victims' perspective (the Khan siblings), and, finally, the "Freudian resolution" involving the crisis and loss of dominance by the father (George), all align with the family melodramas described by Elsaesser.¹⁴

The lives of George and his wife, Ella, along with their seven children – Nazir, Tariq, Abdul, Saleem, Maneer, Meenah, and Sajid – revolve around cultural identity. Born and raised in Europe, the young protagonists are brought up according to principles and customs rooted in their father's homeland – Pakistan – and the religion of Islam. The central events of the film are the failed attempts to arrange marriages for the family's three eldest sons: Nazir, Tariq, and Abdul. The first sequence of EAST IS EAST depicts Nazir's wedding day – or rather, his escape from the ceremony just before he is to take his vows with a woman he barely knows. This act enrages and devastates George. Furious, he declares his son dead, disowns him, and forbids the family from having any contact with him. The storyline gradually leads to a renewed attempt to arrange marriages for two other sons, Tariq and Abdul, with Pakistani girls. George Khan, intolerant of any dissent, arranges these marriages with a respected and wealthy compatriot, Mr. Shah. According to their father's plans, Tariq and Abdul are to marry Mr. Shah's

14 Elsaesser 1991, 68–91.

rather plain daughters, Nushaaba and Nigget. When the plan comes to light, a fierce conflict erupts within the family. Ella, the mother and a white British woman from Yorkshire, sides with her sons against George. To maintain his authority, George resorts not only to verbal arguments but also to yelling and physical violence. The victims of his rage are often the least deserving – his wife and Maneer, the only son who devoutly practices Islam and tries to obey his father's every command.

Writing about the techniques of film “melodramatization”, Elsaesser points to “pervasive psychological pressure on the characters” that is accompanied by “an acute sense of claustrophobia in decor and locale”.¹⁵ Indeed, despite many comedic micro-scenes, the atmosphere in the Khan household remains constantly tense. The siblings, regardless of their age, share a similar apprehension of their father's return to the house or the family-run fish-and-chip shop, as George's presence marks the end of any relaxed or spontaneous behavior. The scene depicting Nazir's failed return home, when the siblings and a crowd of neighbors gathered in front of the Khan house scatter at the sight of George approaching in the distance, perfectly illustrates another observation made by Elsaesser about the characters in family melodramas: “The dramatic configuration, the pattern of the plot makes them, regardless of attempts to break free, constantly look inwards, at each other and themselves.”¹⁶

The pressure George exerts on his children is closely tied to religious demands concerning various aspects of life – clothing, leisure activities, and diet. The planned engagements with two Pakistani girls are merely a continuation of the upbringing they have experienced so far. However, it is this event that triggers the rebellion of both sons. Their opposition is partly related to the significance of marriage itself, but it is also a result of the brothers' not identifying with the (national, religious, gender, etc.) patterns imposed by George. Moreover, Tariq is already in a relationship with an English girl, Stella, whom he hopes to marry in the future. Alongside gestures of helplessness, the film also contains moments of powerful release: direct confrontations between characters and their “hysterical outburst”.¹⁷ One such instance is Tariq's destruction of part of the traditional wedding paraphernalia hidden by his father in a special chest. Frustrated, Tariq finds

15 Elsaesser 1991, 76.

16 Elsaesser 1991, 79.

17 Elsaesser 1991, 79.

two identical watches there, which he correctly assumes are intended as wedding gifts for him and Abdul. Tariq smashes one of the watches before his act of desperation and fury is interrupted by his father's arrival. Tariq's dramatic confession that he does not feel Pakistani and wants to marry an English girl is met with no understanding from his father, who flies into a rage and threatens him with a knife.

But nothing in the world governed by George can stop the matrimonial visit from the Shah family. The scene depicting this visit is brilliantly staged – the characters' forced politeness and the hosts' series of social blunders clearly reveal the lack of consensus on the marriages to be arranged. The explosion comes from the most unexpected cause: a vulgar genital "sculpture" brought into the house by Saleem, who is not directly involved in the engagements. Mrs. Shah, along with her daughters and husband, considers the Khans' behavior an insult and leaves the house in a huff. George must quickly come to terms with the fact that his plan for his sons will not materialize. In a symbolic gesture, he leaves his own house, abandoning his efforts in failure and resignation, which fits perfectly into the framework of Elsaesser's family melodrama.

George's desire for his children, raised in England, to remain like him – hence Pakistani – proves unattainable. In the case of *EAST IS EAST*, we can speak of "a 'Freudian' resolution of the father being eliminated at the very point when he has resigned himself to his loss of supremacy".¹⁸ One of the defining features of melodramas is that they focus on the victim's perspective, making it much easier to examine the issue of arranged marriages from Tariq's or Nazir's point of view than from George's. The idea of arranged marriages in *EAST IS EAST* turns out to be entirely incompatible with the desires of the young protagonists. Their dual Anglo-Pakistani identity in this regard completely diverges from the requirements of the collectivist culture in which marriage is a means to ensure the continuity and cohesion of the community. Nazir, Tariq, Abdul, and their other siblings each have their own plans for the future, plans they want to shape independently.

The original title of both Ayub Khan Din's play (1996) and the film (*EAST IS EAST*), borrowed from Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Ballad of East and West", appears deeply ironic. George's children are no longer merely immigrants or foreigners from the East – their cultural identity has undergone significant transformation under the influence of local English culture. The story is set

18 Elsaesser 1991, 85.

in the Manchester of the 1970s, a context in which arranged marriage had become largely obsolete.

Another prominent British film addressing the topic of arranged marriages in Muslim families is *AE FOND KISS...* by Ken Loach, with a screenplay by Paul Laverty, who has collaborated with the director since 1996. The film is set in Glasgow, where a family of Pakistani immigrants – coincidentally also named Khan – lives. The similarities between *AE FOND KISS...* and *EAST IS EAST* do not end with the families' name. The films also share a similar premise: family conflict arises as a result of double engagements (involving Casim, the son, and Rukhsana, the daughter). Furthermore, Tariq Khan, the father, runs a small shop in the neighborhood and appears to be just as hot-tempered and headstrong as George Khan. However, the tensions between the characters unfold differently in Loach's film, and the dramaturgical structure is also distinct. *AE FOND KISS...* is closer to a romantic melodrama and lacks the complex symbolism characteristic of a family melodrama.

The film opens with a school debate where Tahara – the youngest of the three Khan siblings – delivers a speech on the complicated cultural identities that form in the modern world. Tahara uses herself as an example: a British girl of Pakistani descent attending a Catholic school in Glasgow and supporting a football team from a Protestant neighborhood. The reaction to her speech leaves no doubt – universal tolerance at the school is out of the question. After class, a group of boys taunts her, mocking her skin color. Provoked, Tahara chases after them, and this chaotic situation leads her brother Casim to cross paths with Roisin Hanlon, a music teacher. A close relationship quickly develops between them. At Roisin's initiative, the couple travel to Spain for a three-day getaway. Their passionate romance is interrupted by Casim's confession that he is engaged and will marry his cousin Jasmine in nine weeks. Roisin, who is divorced, reacts with anger and disbelief. Casim manages to calm her down and convince her that he will cancel the marriage arranged by his parents after they return.

However, the protagonist's decision proves to be far more challenging to execute than he anticipated. He fears his parents' anger – breaking off the engagement would be seen as a betrayal of the family. Tariq Khan is already expanding the family home with the intention of accommodating Casim and his future wife. For Tariq, canceling the wedding would be a significant shock. Seeking advice, Casim turns to his cousin Hamid, who strongly discourages him from marrying a *goree*, a white woman. The conversation be-

tween Casim and Hamid offers a rare portrayal of the “Muslim” perspective on Casim’s dilemmas and, more broadly, on the issue of arranged marriages:

HAMID: There’s so many birds out there and you’ve went daft over one bird.

CASIM: I’ve no’ went daft over her.

HAMID: What, you’re gonna screw up your whole family?

CASIM: I’m just supposed to marry somebody I don’t know?

HAMID: Aye. Just do it. Who cares? You’ve got a family to think about.

You’ve got your religion to think about. [...] Would you rather lose your family or would you rather lose this bird? This bird is a nobody.

CASIM: She’s not a nobody.

HAMID: She is a nobody compared to your family, right? Your family back home. You’ve got a mosque right there. Listen, ...

This viewpoint is not unfamiliar to Casim. In his conversations with Roisin, he repeatedly expresses his attachment to religion and speaks respectfully about his parents. However, it seems Tahara is right when she accuses her brother of hypocrisy. Casim starts an affair with the teacher without mentioning he is already engaged. He deceives not only Roisin but also his entire immediate family. Casim wants his parents’ approval and a relaxation of the strict behavioral requirements associated with being a Muslim and the upbringing he has received. However, when Tahara openly demands the same leniency, Casim fails to support her. In her case, it is only about getting her parents’ permission to attend her dream studies in Edinburgh. In another scene, Casim finds his sister at a nightclub and immediately tells her to leave, considering it an unsuitable place for a young girl.

Constantly influenced by others, Casim wavers between planning a future with the new woman and retreating from the decision. From a narrative and character construction standpoint, Casim’s successive changes of heart in *AE FOND KISS*... are not entirely convincing. Thus, two of his sisters play pivotal roles in resolving the central conflict in the film. The older sister, Rukhsana, sets a trap for Roisin. The two women sit in a parked car observing the Khan house from a distance, watching a staged meeting between Casim and Jasmine. Rukhsana convinces Roisin that her brother wants to marry his cousin and would never risk family happiness for a foreign woman. When Roisin runs out of the car, it seems that the “traditional wing” of the Khan family has succeeded. However, Tahara intervenes and makes her brother

realize that he is part of a carefully planned scheme. Finally, Casim is forced to take a side – and he chooses his relationship with Roisin.

In *AE FOND KISS ...*, the problem of arranged marriages in Muslim families is presented from two perspectives, but very unevenly. In Rukhsana's case, the engagement is successful, and she apparently wants to marry according to her parents' wishes and the traditions of her community. However, it is hard to shake the impression that this plotline serves only as a counterpoint to Casim's struggles, which ultimately lead him to break with the practice of arranged marriages. The pressure felt by the protagonist, along with his father's outburst of anger, aligns Loach's film with *EAST IS EAST*, where arranged marriages are portrayed not as ambiguous but as unmistakably coercive and aggressive, pointing clearly toward forced marriages. Furthermore, the character of Tahara is particularly noteworthy – she is the youngest of the Khan siblings in Loach's film and the most conscious and determined in her fight to change how Muslim parents treat their children. This thread leads to films featuring young Muslim women as main characters.

WINGS OF GLASS (SE 2000) and A WEDDING (BE 2016): Daughters, Violence, and Arranged Marriages

The films analyzed so far primarily depict the struggles of boys living in the United Kingdom who fight for the right to marry partners of their own choice despite their Muslim fathers' opposition. The next two films focus on the fate of young daughters who are about to be married off. Reza Bagher's *WINGS OF GLASS* could easily serve as an example of a classic and somewhat predictable coming-of-age story about a teenage girl rebelling against her father, Abbas, and his principles. Once again, the turning point of the plot is the father's desire to quickly arrange marriages for both of his Europe-raised daughters.

The film portrays an Iranian immigrant family living in Sweden and grappling with its cultural and religious identity. The daughters in question are 18-year-old Nazli and her older sister, Mahin. The film's dramatic structure largely relies on contrasting these two characters. Nazli is a rebel – she strives for financial independence, uses the invented name Sara, and has no intention of getting married at such a young age, especially to her cousin Hamid, who has been chosen for her. In contrast, Mahin is excited about the prospect of marrying her chosen fiancé, Hassan, and leads a life devoid of many social activities (she is always seen indoors or in a car); their first

official date at a Greek restaurant leads to their engagement. Meanwhile, Nazli's relationship with Hamid develops quite differently. She rejects his romantic advances but accepts a job offer at his VHS rental shop. This further complicates their relationship, but it is clear from the start that Nazli will never reciprocate Hamid's feelings. Hamid's character is largely exaggerated – he is extremely unlikable, egocentric, and convinced of his attractiveness, mainly due to his wealth. As Sofia Sjö puts it,

Nazli's family does not come across as particularly religious. In a somewhat comic scene, Abbas takes out a religious wall decoration and dusts it off in preparation for the visit of Mahin's soon to be in-laws, who are devout Muslims. For the most part in the film, Islam is thus connected to a traditional life with marriage and children for young women and the family as central focus. Nazli is not comfortable with these ideals.¹⁹

This conflict also runs deep within the protagonist herself. Outside the home, she presents herself as Sara, but she quickly realizes that she will never stop being Nazli, the girl with Iranian roots.²⁰ The duality of Nazli's names is mirrored by other recurring motifs: two family parties, two visits to a tattoo parlor, two escapes from her apartment, and two heartfelt conversations with her father.

As in Loach's and O'Donnell's films, in *WINGS OF GLASS* the process of arranging marriages takes on a specific form. It is not the result of a voluntary agreement between Abbas and his daughters but rather a series of silent gestures and tensions among family members, with the two suitors also playing significant roles. Ultimately, realizing that his efforts are doomed, Hamid attempts to assault Nazli one evening in the back room of his shop. Terrified, Nazli manages to escape and confides in her sister that she was almost a victim of rape. Together, they decide that Hamid will never again set foot in their home, not even at Mahin's upcoming wedding. Meanwhile, Nazli strikes up a friendship with Johan, a 20-year-old Swede who is a regular customer at the video store. Like Nazli, Johan has lost his mother, a shared experience that brings them closer.

Nazli's conflict with her father gradually escalates, reaching its climax when Hamid appears at Mahin and Hassan's wedding party. Without offer-

19 Sjö 2021, 118.

20 Sjö 2021, 119.

ing any explanation, Nazli pours punch on him, an act that Abbas interprets as an irresponsible teenage prank. It is only then that Nazli attempts to explain the reason for her behavior – the sexual assault by her cousin. Abbas struggles to believe her accusations at first and reacts inadequately, with aggression and insults. The situation culminates in a family row and Nazli running away from home. Eventually, Abbas pays her a surprise visit at Johan's apartment. During an honest and emotional conversation, both father and daughter break down in tears, sealing their reconciliation.

The film ends with a montage sequence, including a scene in which Nazli receives her motorcycle license, congratulated by both her father and Johan. This is followed by a family meal, signaling that Abbas has ultimately accepted his daughter's choices – riding a motorcycle, dating a Swedish boy, and postponing marriage. Nazli's character undoubtedly shows that the film portrays the practice of arranged marriages in a critical light. Her would-be fiancé, Hamid, is not only grotesque but also dangerous. In fact, the film's narrative equates the attempt to force her into marriage with an act of sexual violence. This parallel starkly reveals the element of coercion inherent in a father's control over his daughters' matrimonial affairs. From this perspective, Abbas's transformation is as significant as Nazli's resilience and courage. Over the course of the film, Abbas begins to understand that forcing his younger daughter into marriage will not bring her happiness but will only alienate her – and perhaps cause him to lose her forever.

The film that portrays the most dramatic side of forced marriages in Muslim family is *A WEDDING*, by Belgian director Stephan Streker. The movie was inspired by true events that took place in Belgium in 2007. The film revolves around the Kazim family, Pakistani immigrants living in Belgium. Streker admitted in interviews that the 18-year-old protagonist, Zahira, is for him a modern-day Antigone.²¹ Indeed, he tried to shape his film in the style of a Greek tragedy. There is no doubt that *A WEDDING* presents the issue of forced marriages in Islam in the most drastic and categorical way this article has described so far, without any trace of comedic elements.

The structure of Streker's drama is similar to the narratives in the previously described films in many ways – the sudden pressure from Zahira's parents to arrange her marriage disrupts previously harmonious family relationships. Her rebellion is accompanied by attempts from her family to negotiate her behavior, while Zahira's defiance causes her relatives signifi-

21 Engelen 2017.

cant distress (her father, Mansoor, suffers serious heart attacks as a result of the stress). Meanwhile, Zahira becomes involved in an unacceptable relationship with Pierre, a non-Muslim boyfriend. The general plot follows the outline that is standard for films about arranged marriages, differing from other films mainly in the detail. The novelty in *A WEDDING* appears in three key features: the exposition, the turning point, and the resolution.

The exposition focuses on Zahira's plan to undergo an abortion. She schedules the procedure, expressing surprise at its low cost and clearly struggling with her situation. The most astonishing aspect, however, is that her brother Amir and the entire immediate family – parents included – are aware of her pregnancy and the planned abortion. Zahira experiences serious doubts about terminating her pregnancy, not least for reasons of her religion. After receiving no support from her boyfriend, Tariq, she breaks up with him (in line with her family's wishes) but decides at the last moment not to go through with the abortion, keeping this decision secret from her family. Her pregnancy is undoubtedly one of the reasons her parents want to marry her off quickly. In the context of their subsequent efforts to arrange Zahira's marriage to a Pakistani man in a traditional Muslim ceremony, the contradiction between encouraging her to have an abortion and their strict adherence to religious customs stands out. Their concern for family honor allows them to set aside religious requirements. This additional layer complicates the portrayal of arranged marriage, making it unique amongst the films discussed here.

The second distinguishing feature of *A WEDDING* is that the arranged marriage process is carried through to completion. In the other films analyzed in this article, the protagonists rebel and ultimately either break off the engagement or avoid it altogether. Zahira's experience is different. Emotionally shaken after the unperformed abortion and unsure of her feelings, she resigns herself to online conversations with potential suitors from Pakistan. None of them makes a significant impression on her, but one – Adnan – can at least speak French. Zahira's mother, Yelda, considers her daughter's mildly positive comment about Adnan decisive. Anticipating the inevitable engagement, Zahira runs away from home for the first time. She finds refuge with her friend Aurora and Aurora's father, André, who offer their support and help. After various attempts to pressure her, including a visit from her older sister Hina, who convinces her to accept the idea of an arranged marriage, Zahira returns home.

What follows is a bizarre wedding ceremony for Zahira and Adnan. The atmosphere at the bride's home is festive – everyone wears traditional attire,

and the ceremony is led by an imam. However, the marriage is conducted via an online video conference, as the groom is in Pakistan. Shortly afterward, Zahira learns that she is expected to travel to Pakistan, prompting her second escape, this time with Pierre. Zahira's departure with another man after being married is utterly incomprehensible and unacceptable to her family. The young couple flees on Pierre's motorcycle and finds refuge outside the city. Even in these moments of temporary relief, Streker maintains the film's tense formal style, particularly with close-ups and muted sound. The couple likely plan to leave the country. However, Zahira's parents have her passport. To retrieve it, Zahira contacts her younger sister and arrives at their home at an agreed time. Waiting for her there is not only Amara but also their brother, Amir. When Zahira takes back the passport and heads for the exit, Amir stops her and embraces her tightly. The two are standing motionless, filmed in a medium close-up, when two gunshots ring out. Subsequent shots reveal a pool of blood and tears in Amir's eyes. The film concludes with a photo montage reminiscent of police documentation that is accompanied by Zahira's voice-over reading a letter sent to her sister in Pakistan.

The Belgian director connects arranged marriages with "honor killings" within Muslim communities. It seems that both practices stem from the obscurantist concept of "family honor", distinct from both religion and religious tradition. Wiebke Walther explains:

Since the 1930s both male and female writers of modern Middle Eastern literature have addressed the issue of "honor killings" in short stories, novels, and poems. This practice cannot be traced back to Islam alone but derives from ancient principles of chastity. Women must adhere to them, though their close male relatives are the ones held responsible for their observance (often by women of the older generation). If these principles are violated, punishment of the woman is required.²²

In *A WEDDING*, Zahira's escape with a non-Muslim man after marrying Adnan is perceived by her relatives as a disgrace to the family's honor. Her betrayal lies not only in breaking her promise to her intended husband and his family but also in defying her father's and brother's authority, exposing their inability to control her actions. What is even more shocking is that her

22 Walther 2010, 656.

death is inflicted by her own brother – the very person who had previously been her advocate and closest support within the family. This devastating act underscores the underlying tragedy in Streker's film. The story thus evokes the structure of ancient tragedies, where betrayal and conflicts of loyalty lead to violence within the closest family circles.

Conclusion

The protagonists of all the films discussed in this article rebel against arranged marriages, which are portrayed more as coercive than as consensual, and strive to have freedom of choice and to expand their personal autonomy. In European cinema the issue of forced marriages affects men just as much as women – on screen, both sons and daughters from Muslim families face pressure to accept the spouse chosen for them. However, the consequences for women who refuse an arranged marriage tend to be more severe, as women are perceived as embodying the family's honor, while men are regarded as its guardians. Additionally, this pressure can be exerted by almost every close family member: not just fathers (most often, with a clearly dominant role) but also mothers, siblings (both brothers and sisters), and grandparents or cousins. Regardless of whether the films adopt a comedic or dramatic tone, their young male and female protagonists routinely reject the notion of arranged marriage and instead opt for individual choice. In all the analyzed films, the primary criterion for evaluating candidates for an arranged marriage is not their personal qualities but rather their specific origin and religious affiliation. As a result, traditional Muslim families, usually portrayed as otherwise harmonious, expose themselves to deep conflicts with the younger generation raised in Europe.

Two issues raised by this discussion are particularly striking. First, contradicting the evidence for forced marriages in Islam that was cited in the first part of this article, financial motives do not have a key role in matrimonial choices in any of the films discussed here. Economic benefits, often described by scholars and today condemned in many Muslim countries, do not feature in the cinematic representations of the phenomenon by the European film industry. The reasons for arranged marriages are presented as more profound – marriage in these circumstances is a matter of identity. Choosing a spouse from the same ethnic and religious group is intended to ensure the purity of a carefully preserved religious and cultural identity.

Second, the films' negotiation of masculine, especially paternal, conduct is noteworthy. While a patriarchal concept of manliness is criticized and disapproved of, fragile masculinity is embraced, for only the latter can admit weakness and accept failure. Thus, the endings of the more light-hearted films see a change in the attitude of the family patriarch, which is in line with migrant comedy conventions,²³ as one of the distinctive narrative and ideological tropes of this genre is the reaffirmation of the primary role of the family. In *WINGS OF GLASS* (and *HUSH HUSH BABY* as well) the ending takes on a comedic and conciliatory tone, whereas the conclusions in *EAST IS EAST*, *AE FOND KISS...* (and also similarly in *TURQUAZE*, *WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY*, *FOR A HAPPY LIFE*, *HEDI* and *MUSTANG*) lean toward melodrama. In contrast, *THE WEDDING* delivers an ending that is outright tragic.

Bibliography

- Domalewski, Adam, 2020, Towards a Multicultural Community. The Accommodation of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in the "Migrant Comedy" Genre, *Ekphrasis* 23, 1, 50–61, <https://doi.org/10.24193/ekphrasis.23.4>.
- Dönmez-Colin, Gönül, 2004, *Women, Islam and Cinema*, London: Reaktion Books.
- Elsaesser, Thomas, 1991, Tales of Sound and Fury. Observations on the Family Melodrama, in: Landy, Marcia (ed.), *Imitations of Life. A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 68–91.
- Engelen, Aureore, 2017, Stephan Streker – Director. "Zahira Is the Girl Who Says No: An Antigone for Our Times", *Cineuropa*, 21 February 2017, <https://cineuropa.org/en/interview/323616/> [accessed 14 February 2025].
- Engineer, Asghar Ali, 2005, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.
- Feroze, Muhammad R., 2003, The Reform in Family Laws in the Muslim World, in: Turner, Bryan S. (ed.), *Islam. Critical Concepts in Sociology*. Vol. 3: *Islam, Gender and the Family*, London / New York: Routledge, 1–21.
- Moghadam, Valentine M. / Mitra, Namrata, 2014, Women and Gender in the Muslim World, in: Kenney, Jeffrey T. / Moosa, Ebrahim (eds.), *Islam in the Modern World*, London / New York: Routledge, 151–176.
- Sjö, Sofia, 2021, *Strong Girls and Lost Boys? Growing up Muslim in Nordic Films*, in: Petersen, Kristian (ed.), *Muslims in the Movies. A Global Anthology*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 115–128.
- Walther, Wiebke, 2010, The Situation of Women in Islamic Countries, in: Ende, Werner / Steinbach, Udo (eds.), *Islam in the World Today. A Handbook of Politics, Religion, Culture, and Society*, Ithaca, NY / London: Cornell University Press, 619–681.

23 Domalewski 2020, 50–61.

Filmography

AE FOND KISS... (Ken Loach, UK 2004).

EAST IS EAST (Damien O'Donnell, UK 1999).

FARSAN (Josef Fares, SE 2010).

HVA VIL FOLK SI (WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY, Iram Haq, NO 2017).

INHEBBEK HEDI (HEDI, Mohamed Ben Attia, TN/FR/BE 2016).

JALLA! JALLA! (THE BEST MAN'S WEDDING, Josef Fares, SE 2000).

MUSTANG (Deniz Gamze Ergüven, FR/DE/TR 2015).

NOCES (A WEDDING, Stephan Streker, BE 2016).

POUR VIVRE HEUREUX (FOR A HAPPY LIFE, Salima Glamine and Dimitri Linder, BE 2018).

SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI! (HUSH HUSH BABY, Albert ter Heerdt, NL 2004).

TURQUAZE (Kadir Balci, BE 2010).

VINGAR AV GLAS (WINGS OF GLASS, Reza Bagher, SE 2000).