

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Presenting future brides: The English matrimonial advertisement as a window to social class in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Publishing matrimonial advertisements in newspapers is a popular method used to seek and locate potential marriage partners in Sri Lanka. This article focuses on English-language matrimonials published by or on behalf of aspiring brides. Advertisers typically seek compatibility in aspects such as ethnicity, religion, and caste, along with social class as a factor that is implicitly signalled through educational and professional qualifications, employment and career, residence, and marital status. English is intricately tied to these aspects of social class as well. Factors related to marriage as shown in matrimonials have not been investigated frequently in contemporary scholarship. This article analyzes 729 English-language matrimonials published in January 2019 in Sri Lankan newspapers to investigate the presentation of the potential bride, potential groom and their families. The article is in two parts. First, we present the connection between Sri Lankan English and the other social categories discussed in the matrimonials. In doing so, we also analyze the specific linguistic register used to present matrimonials. Secondly, we present the intricate ways in which social class is signalled via education, occupation, residence, and migrant status of the prospective bride or family. English-language matrimonials serve middle-class families in upward social mobility or the maintenance of classed status, so this paper illustrates the need for more in-depth research into this fascinating phenomenon.

Keywords: Marriage, Sri Lanka, social class, matrimonial advertisements, women.

INTRODUCTION

Bodu Govi Durawa parents from Colombo seek academically and professionally qualified son for their slim pleasant daughter born 1992, height 5'7" studied at a Colombo leading Buddhist School, B.Sc Degree CIMA qualified and MBA working as an Assistant Manager in a private company. Only brother is working in a multinational company as a Financial Analyst. Inherits substantial assets. Kindly reply with family details, horoscope and contact number. (email address removed)

For someone new to Sri Lankan culture, some information in the above matrimonial, as in 'Bodu Govi Durawa', will be incomprehensible. Other references, such as that of a single sibling, 'CIMA' and remarks about schooling, may appear strange choices to present. For many Sri Lankans, however, the categories invoked here are so 'normal' as to be commonsensical. It is this 'taken for grantedness' that we aim to trouble through this article.

Arranging marriages on behalf of an offspring, a sibling, or a relative is a common practice in many Asian and African countries. Sri Lankan English newspaper matrimonial advertisements for prospective brides are published in a widely accepted format in newspapers,

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usually on Sundays, by a family member on a woman's behalf, or less often by the woman herself, in search of a potential spouse for heterosexual and monogamous marriage. Besides inviting applications for marriage, these advertisements also present a quantity of personal information—including membership in a social class or ethno-religious community, levels of education, and physical attributes—to readers and potential applicants.

At present, research on English-language matrimonials, especially those published in Sri Lanka, is virtually non-existent. There is a general belief that ethnicity, caste and religion are the deciding factors in arranged marriages, but the impact of social class as a foundational element of contemporary marriage has been generally overlooked, except in the recent work of Asha Abeyasekera (2016; 2021). In a matrimonial advertisement, the family relies on signifiers of social class, such as their education, career prospects and their fluency in English, to signal class affiliations - not only their own, but what would be expected of the prospective suitors. By analysing English-language matrimonials in Sri Lankan newspapers, our objective is to illustrate such class-related characteristics as shown via the matrimonials and through this, to contribute to marriage-related research from Sri Lanka.

Before we present an analysis of social class-related criteria given in these matrimonials, we provide a brief description of the matrimonial advertisement itself. Then, the literature review draws connections between the English language, class and marriage. The methodology and data are presented after that. The analysis discusses the categories of education, occupation and migration that appear as major points of interest in matrimonial advertisements, and aspects of the prospective bride (and groom) that are considered less acceptable. Concluding remarks follow.

THE MATRIMONIAL ADVERTISEMENT

'Arranged' marriages were - and in some instances still are - typically arranged through kinship networks, using trusted intermediaries (Caldwell, 2005; Jayawardena, 2007).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that a contemporary version of this is through an introduction, via mutual acquaintances. However, a popular method of seeking a potential marriage partner is through the newspaper matrimonial. Abeyasekera (2021) describes English newspaper matrimonials, or 'matrimonial classifieds', appearing in the 1940s and becoming popular amongst the petit-bourgeoisie since they lacked the kinship ties that made marriage arrangements easier, in their

relocated Colombo setting. In the present day, newspaper matrimonials remain important for the arranged marriage process. Dissanayake (1982) stated that the role performed by newspaper matrimonials is similar to that of the other conventional forms in locating suitable potential spouses. They allow access to one's social group while adhering to a socially and culturally approved framework in arranging a marriage. They also help to keep people's cultural identity and pride in tradition intact (Reyes-Hockings, 1961). Another advantage of newspaper matrimonials is that, regardless of one's geographical location, the seeker can easily access her desired group (Dissanayake, 1982). They are now also available online.

As seen in the introductory example, matrimonials have a specific form and are written in a specialised 'type' of Sri Lankan English, (SLE) which is the variety of English that Sri Lankans use both as a first language and as a later-learned language (see Gunsekera, 2005 for an overview). The socially accepted - or prestige form - of Sri Lankan English is Standard Sri Lankan English (SSLE) and is the variety the English-speaking middle class typically uses. Concerning marriage, for example, SLE uses the term 'settled', indicating that heterosexual marriage is considered to have a stabilising function. The matrimonial, however, is not written in the usual SSLE; it uses a 'register': "a linguistic repertoire that is associated, culture internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices" (Agha, 1999: p.215)¹. In other words, registers index social identities and social functions.

The most distinctive of the register used in matrimonials is the use of Sri Lankan terminology related to marriage and Sinhalese culture, which infuses this register with a Sri Lankan identity. The register includes words, phrases, and abbreviations mainly related to physicality, character, personality, relationships, assets, astrology, religion and caste. Many terms are borrowed into SLE from Sinhala. Like any specialised register, this also makes frequent use of abbreviations and acronyms. Table 1 categorises SLE terms identified in the matrimonials. A more general meaning of the term is provided in square brackets, where necessary.

The person writing the matrimonial must also understand the genre that is expected.

The matrimonial is a genre which is characterised by its brevity as well as its format. Analysis of the collected matrimonials shows information that must be typically included: seeker(s) and their details, a description of the prospective bride, what is sought in the groom, details of the horoscope and the method of contact.

Table 1: Categories of SLE words, phrases and abbreviations in the matrimonials published on prospective brides

Characteristic	Example SLE words, phrases and abbreviations
Physicality	Chubby [plump], tan complexioned
Character	Charm [unpretentious], virtuous, unblemished [not promiscuous/virgin]
Habits	NS/TT [non-smoker and teetotaler]
Kinship terms	Senior daughter, junior sister, one and only daughter
Assets	Upstairs house [house with two floors], bungalow, coconut properties (12) acres, precious land, dowry
Astrology	Malefic ² HC [malefic horoscope], Kuja and Shani in the 7 th House
Religion	B [Buddhist], RC [Roman Catholic]
Caste	G [Govi], K [Karava], S [Salagama] ³ , no barriers [a specific characteristic is not considered]
Miscellaneous	No encumbrances (sic) [no children out of previous marriage], own tuition classes, lakhs

We present two examples to illustrate the use of the matrimonial genre and its register.

Example 1 (Ad 441)

GALLE close by November 1986 5' 3 ½" in height *fair complexioned* slim *charm* B.Sc. M.Sc. Graduate daughter of *Buddhist Govi Karawa* Teacher parents. Assistant Registrar of a State University. (Kuja 01) Seek State University Graduate, devoid of all vices honest slim Engineer/ Doctor/ Lecturer/ Accountant son. Please call after 7.30 pm. [phone number removed] (emphasis added)

Example 1 includes information on the seekers (the parents), the level of education, status and character sought in the groom, describes the prospective bride, and provides a specific alignment of the horoscope and a phone number. It explains the qualities sought in the prospective groom and how to contact the advertisers. These functions are done through register-specific features such as abbreviated syntactic structures (e.g. "Galle close by", i.e., living close to the town of Galle), terminology related to caste (e.g. "Govi" and "Karawa"), astrology-related terminology (Kuja 01 i.e., Mars in the first house), information related to age (e.g. "November 1986"), terms related to appearance (e.g. "fair complexioned"), and personality (e.g. "charm").

For an informed user of this register, this matrimonial advertisement also conveys the message that the place of residence matters (by placing it first), that the bride's

horoscope is considered malefic and therefore she would need a horoscope compatible with that specific factor, and that they are looking for a groom who does not smoke, drink alcohol, gamble or womanise ("devoid of all vices"). It also specifically states preferred professions.

Some other characteristics are presented in the next example.

Example 2 (Ad 470)

Govi Roman Catholic parents residing in immediate suburbs of Colombo is (sic) looking for a partner for their daughter professionally qualified, married and divorced in less than 03 years – *innocent party no encumbrances*. She is tall slim very pleasant smart kind-hearted and caring. Very well brought up. Younger brother is married and settled, willing to reside any part of the World. *Dowry* a house worth over Rs. 25 M. Please contact E-mail [email address removed] Tel. No. [phone number removed] (emphasis added)

This advertisement also presents caste, religion, residence, appearance and personality. The terms "innocent party" and "no encumbrances" are common to the register and signify that it was not the woman's fault that her previous marriage ended and that she has no children out of that marriage (see section 5.2). 'Dowry' is another register-specific term, and informs the reader about her financial assets, in addition to her professional

qualifications. As in example 1, the abbreviated syntax (“please contact email”) brings attention to the limitation on words entailed by advertising in this manner.

In this manner, the use of English and the specific register used in advertising for a potential spouse indicate mastery of English. The fact that these are published in English indirectly reveals a desire to be viewed as a part of the urban middle class of Sri Lanka (or its diaspora). The association with this register also conveys to the reader that prospective brides and their families are confident in handling English and indicates the possibility of upward social mobility. Those unaccustomed to the traditions and language associated with an arranged marriage in Sri Lanka would thus find it difficult to fully comprehend these matrimonials. The next section provides a synthesis of related prior research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Class, women, and marriage

The phenomenon of ‘late marriage’ in Sri Lanka has resulted in curiosity in researchers (Caldwell, 1996; Malhotra & Tsui, 1996). Since late colonial times, it appears that at least in urban areas, women marry in their mid to late twenties, which is much later than the late-adolescence or early twenties age-at-marriage of the region (Caldwell, 1999). Considering this exception, contemporary Sri Lankan marriage has received remarkably little attention until Abeyasekera’s recent work (Abeyasekera, 2021). Both Abeyasekera’s work and de Munck’s (1996) work on Muslim marriages in a rural community challenge the usual assumptions on the arranged versus choice issue in Sri Lankan marriages.

The criteria for partners as expressed in the matrimonials show how social class and gender shape women’s choices in marriage. Kumari Jayawardena (2007)’s influential work, *Nobodies to Somebodies*, describes how a caste-based Ceylonese society transformed into a class-based society during colonial times and the importance of ‘judicious marriage’ for this transformation (p.155; also see Chapter 16). As Jayawardena (2007) records meticulously, the shift to a class-based social structure included the accumulation of capital via lands, professional status, education and the English language. In the twenty-first-century Sinhalese community, which is the user of a majority of the advertised proposals, caste still intersects with class in complicated ways (see also Abeyasekera, 2021). More than compatibility in terms of religion or ethnicity, it was compatibility in terms of class that is sought after in marriage (Abeyasekera, 2021). It could be said that post-1980 economic liberalisation produced far-reaching

changes in the middle classes of Sri Lanka. Yet, there is no work that focuses on this transition, either generally or in relation to marriage and kinship. The lack of literature theorising changes to Sri Lankan social classes during the past four decades makes it difficult for us to provide definitive characteristics that distinguish the present-day middle classes from other classes, except in broad strokes. Nevertheless, the next section, and our analysis, confirm that some of these characteristics of class persist to the present.

As an aside, we note that commentaries on Sri Lankan marriage are, however, mostly relevant to the Sinhalese. Less is written about the marriage practices of urban middle-class women of minority communities.⁴ An exception is the study by Malhotra & Tsui (1996) in which almost 20% of the participants were Moors.

Sri Lankan English, education, employment and norms for marriage

English plays a central role in marriage arrangements in Sri Lanka. Access or desire for the English language has been, and continues to be, a key characteristic of upward mobility and as such, of being and becoming middle-class (Parakrama, 1995; Guneseekera, 2005; Jayawardena, 2007). Exemplifying this, Malhotra & Mather (1997) show that the married women in their 1990s survey were generally of the same level or better educated than their husbands. If the class is an important factor in deciding compatibility in marriage, as has been shown, it follows that fluency in English is important for marital prospects and that English is also important for education, employment, and other characteristics necessary for better marital prospects, which we discuss in this section. Therefore, this section will discuss the literature on the place of English as a class marker (and maker) of English, and thereafter discuss the place of education, career, and residency in marriage in Sri Lanka.

The role played by the English language in Sri Lanka is similar to that in other British post-colonies. Classified as a ‘link language’ in the Constitution of 1978, English plays a far more significant role than that. The power and privilege associated with English was previously transferred primarily through the family. English is, and has been, the language of upward mobility and an indicator of social accomplishment that elevates social capital among present-day Sri Lankans (Guneseekera, 2005; Kandiah, 2010). Unlike in the immediate post-independence era when English divided classes into a small elite with access to English and larger groups with little access to it, the contemporary landscape of the English language in the country is more complex

(Parakrama, 1995; Medawattegedera, 2023). Access to English differs significantly according to an individual's socioeconomic status and education, hence the term 'English speaking background', earlier used to indicate that the family used English as a dominant language and therefore was of a professional or upper-middle-class family, may not be as pertinent as it used to be. English is now transferred to the next generation through education and professional opportunities so, it is not uncommon to have fluent users of Standard Sri Lankan English in families where a parent does not use English. Rural and poorer Sri Lankans have little access to English because they lack access to the routes through which the middle classes have been accessing English: through private English language classes, bilingual (i.e., English medium) education in schools, international schools, and other such avenues (see for e.g. Wettewa, 2016). These establish the consensus among the population that the knowledge of English is one of the most potent factors in achieving social mobility.

As such, English is an important characteristic of marital compatibility. Abeyasekera (2021) states that the urban middle classes in South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka needs "knowledge of English" to secure distinction within their social class. It indicates the potential partner's ability to aid upward social mobility and attainment of status for the whole family.

Siri Hettige's (2000) mapping of social class and type of education post-1977 is useful here. He argues that the working class, lower middle class and the conventional middleclass use state education; that the new urban middle class (shaped by post-1977 private and transnational economic sectors) access private education and that the capitalist class accesses both private and transnational (or international) education. Not enough work has been done to exemplify or test such a mapping. Nevertheless, as Abeyasekera (2021) comments, "the anxiety to get children into prestigious schools, the determination for them to learn English, their enrollment into a range of extracurricular activities, the insistence on their higher education and the attention paid to personal appearance" all illustrate parental determination to improve their social prestige and class status (p.105). As this shows, English is intricately tied up in this endeavour, because it is through these modes of education that English is also accessed. Our study shows that fluency in English is also signalled indirectly.

Private schools and well-resourced urban schools have long served the purpose of enabling entry to privilege and Westernisation, as the authors above claim - not only through education but also consequent

to that, to employment networks and marriage. School type is granted mention in matrimonials that we studied as well. Siri Gamage (2011) says that the international school⁵ "contributes to the creation and maintenance of a privileged strata of society whose values, interests and aspirations as well as ideologies are pro-Western, not Sri Lankan" (p.26) but as we show later, it is not only international schools that are mentioned in matrimonials.

Education is seen as a contributing factor to later marriage in Sri Lankan women from colonial times (Malhotra & Tsui, 1996; Silva, *et al.*, 1998). Caldwell (2005) found that women cited 'completing education' as a factor for lateness in marriage. In a study conducted in the late 1990s with undergraduates as participants, Silva, *et al.*, (1998) found that their participants expected to be married in the latter twenties. While it may be expected then that women selecting their partner may marry at a later age, in the Sri Lankan case, it appears that it is the women opting for arranged marriages that marry later (Malhotra & Tsui, 1996; Caldwell, 2005).

Employment is another significant factor in the matrimonials. This is not surprising when we consider the larger percentage of women completing secondary education. Anju Malhotra's work shows that even in the 1990s, women gave importance to the idea of work (Malhotra & Tsui, 1996; Malhotra & Mather, 1997). In Malhotra & Mather's (1997) analysis of a survey of over 500 married women from Kalutara, over 90% "favour the idea of paid work for women" (p.615) though the reality is far less (which the researchers consider a problem of the economy and lack of work opportunities, rather than the women's choice).

In terms of residence, findings in related work show that unlike in neighboring countries, married couples in Sri Lanka do not necessarily have to or choose to reside with the husband's family, which has consequences on the independence of their decision-making during the marriage (Malhotra & Tsui, 1996; Malhotra & Mather, 1997). We note here the need for research that directly explores the connections between residency and marital prospects and hope this article contributes to that.

Finally, an aspect shown clearly in the matrimonials is the expectation in terms of virtue in middle-class women (de Alwis, 2002; Abeyasekera, 2021). In a study conducted during 1989-1993 by Malhotra & Tsui (1996) involving nearly 1500 urban, mostly middle-class (80%) woman participants, half of the women who were married had their marriages arranged by their families. Of the others, they found that the parents of 'older

daughters' (presumably late twenties or thirties) tend to initiate a search for partners, illustrating that middle-class women are still expected to enter heterosexual marriage and that they must marry 'appropriately' (also see Caldwell, 2005). In the anthropological literature on women of the Sinhala middle classes, appropriate behaviour is framed as having *laejja-baya* (shyness/shame-fear) (de Alwis, 2002; Sirisena, 2016; Abeyasekera, 2021).

Rather than meaning that women should be shy, this is a requirement of decorous behaviour. Despite the women's educational attainments and career choices, they must also show that they have not become 'too modern' by choosing an appropriate partner for marriage in terms of education, employment prospects and social class, i.e., 'background'. Additionally, the strictures of moral behaviour for women also mostly apply to marriage. Mihirini Sirisena's (2016) undergraduate participants (of lower to lower-middle-class backgrounds) used the term *haediyawa* (upbringing) to refer to the genteel ways in which not only women but men too, were expected to behave. As we show in the matrimonials, it is not only women but also men who have to display their suitability for marriage (see 5.2).

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative analysis of matrimonial advertisements, using a corpus of selected matrimonials. 729 matrimonials published on behalf of prospective brides in January 2019 were collected from two national Sunday newspapers, the *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Observer*. Matrimonials with blurred text were removed in making the corpus. The cleaned data were transferred to an Excel sheet and subjected to inductive (open) coding so that sixty-four codes emerged from the data itself. These codes were recorded separately. The codes were then grouped into thirty-three categories, followed by a close examination to identify patterns and relationships, from which three themes related to the presentation of the bride emerged.

Since the matrimonials were taken from published newspapers, they can be considered public data. However, they are meant for potential spouses and their families and are hence more personal than commercial advertisements or news articles. Although the details of the prospective bride and her family are not provided in the matrimonial, the contact numbers, email addresses or serial numbers can identify the parties. Hence, in the data cleaning stage, phone numbers and email addresses in the matrimonials were replaced with generic phrases such as [phone number removed] and [email address removed] to eliminate any link to identities. Serial numbers assigned

to the matrimonials by the newspaper publishers for their tracking purposes were also removed. This process ensured that the data was systematically analysed while maintaining the privacy of individuals, allowing for a nuanced understanding of Sri Lankan matrimonial advertisements.

ANALYSIS

Presentation of the bride and family

This section provides other aspects related to class affiliation presented by the advertiser, usually the bride's family. Many references to the potential bride's social class can be identified in the data. We pay special attention to the educational and professional qualifications, residence and marital status of a prospective bride, and indicate where English is implicated. This section will discuss those aspects.

Educated brides

A main indicator of the social status of a prospective bride is the place(s) and extent of education. Examples abound, such as "studied in Kandy Leading School" (Ad 43), "Convent educated" (Ad 414), "graduate of J'pura, Colombo and SLIT", i.e., three universities (Ad 428) and "presently reading for PhD in Chemistry in a Westcoast University in USA" (Ad 547). 'Leading schools' are still coveted status markers, despite the rising importance of private education in the middle classes. The matrimonials referring to 'leading schools' illustrate that the family has wealth or connections, since entering a child to a 'leading' school means that the family resides in close proximity to a large school in an urban setting, was admitted through intellectual merit (via scholarship), or that the family used their privilege or connections to gain the child admittance. The larger public schools are known to attract better-trained teachers their social status would be thereby enhanced; so it leads to a belief that education at such schools would be superior to others. A statement such as "convent educated" conveys the notion of a strict religious upbringing. With such a term, the advertiser hopes to present the prospective bride as disciplined and religious. In addition, since gaining admission to these educational institutes is usually difficult, it demonstrates membership in alumni networks or the financial ability of the family. Such attendance also carries the possibility of admission of future progeny, as alumni have better opportunities to educate children in these same schools.

Since tertiary education is limited in Sri Lanka, university education signals that the prospective bride is better educated. State universities only admit a small

percentage of students from the larger school population and thus, graduation from a state university such as “J’pura” (University of Sri Jayewardenepura) and “Colombo” (University of Colombo) shows the bride’s higher intellectual capacity. “SLIIT”, on the other hand, is a private university associated with prestige and status because it is a reputed non-governmental university that is quite expensive. The fact that the prospective bride has graduated from both state and private universities indicates that her family is able and willing to afford more educational opportunities for their daughter and reflects her perseverance in academic pursuits. A PhD from the English-speaking, developed country of America signals that the prospective bride is capable of handling the language of power, prestige, and privilege (i.e., English) and is highly educated, as well. Such references can be construed as overt indications of social class and familial attitudes regarding women’s education and career prospects. Therefore, the mention of schools and/or universities indicates more than just the prospective bride’s education. Since her place(s) of education convey the prospective bride and her family’s financial worth, social affluence and attitude towards education, such details also position her better for hypergamous (or ‘class-climbing’) marriage opportunities. We return to the topic of education in 5.1.3 when discussing place of residence.

Working brides

The Sri Lankan English newspaper matrimonials placed by or for prospective brides convey many details related to their occupation. Most matrimonials name the job or profession even if it is simply to mention that the prospective bride is ‘occupied’ or ‘employed’. This information illustrates the importance of employment or career for middle-class women and supports findings in prior research. The employment types are diverse, ranging from “Medical Laboratory Technician” (Ad 192) to “Highly Employee Officer daughter” (sic) (Ad 255) to “Financial Analyst” (Ad 409).

While the first and last examples demonstrate an aptitude towards science and finance respectively, the second example positions the prospective bride in a role of stability and status. While a “government pensionable job” (as stated in Ad 369) and a “grama niladhari” (aka “grama sevaka”⁶, Ad 671) may not convey wealth or prestige, they may be considered attractive in a prospective bride, especially by the older generation, as such jobs represent financial stability via public employment and job security. Also highly desirable are the working hours of state employment, with conventional office hours and non-working weekends, which are considered suitable

for women, allowing them to deal with childcare post-marriage.

The data shows that a significant proportion of the prospective brides (35.9%) are those in the traditionally sought-after professions, such as doctor (55 items), engineer (45 items), teacher (45 items), and accountant (22 items). Example phrases describing these professions from the matrimonials include “Government university senior lecturer... daughter” (Ad 16) and “MBBS Doctor daughter” (Ad 518). The high number of female engineers can be considered a change in gendered education (and perceptions) in recent times, given that women are still approximately 20% of the entrants to engineering programs, and is a discipline with a larger proportion of male students (University Grants Commission, 2022). To the contextually astute reader, this signals that the prospective bride is academically competitive in the sciences (traditionally of higher status than the arts). Other professions that are still dominated by men, such as banker (5 items), scientist (5 items), and researcher (3 items), can be considered unusual as well, and are fewer in number.

The teaching profession is a sought-after profession for women, with its lengthy holidays and the (mis)perception that a teacher’s job ends once school ends in the early afternoon. Forty-two (5.76% of the total) of the matrimonials stated that the prospective bride was a teacher. Out of this number, eight (1.09% of the total matrimonials under scrutiny) mentioned that she works at a government school, while another twelve (1.65% of the total) stated that she worked at an international or private school. Eight (1.09% of the total) of the 42 matrimonials mentioning the prospective bride’s occupation as a teacher stated that she teaches English or in the English medium section. While working at a government school can indicate stability and job security, stating that the woman works at an international or private school and/or teaching English or in the English medium section of the school associates her with the prestige and power of English (though not necessarily a better salary). Such individuals can be assumed to be far more fluent in English and be associated also with the ability to teach an English-medium curriculum and possess a more ‘Westernised’ demeanour. In turn, this indicates some level of middle-class sophistication which might be assumed to be lacking in government school teachers. Such jobs may therefore be presented as a plus factor over the other prospective brides in the newspaper. Hence, a prospective bride with a safe, established occupation (e.g. teacher) or a prestigious one (e.g. doctor) indicates that although she is financially independent and professionally qualified, her secondary

role as the woman of a family post-marriage will not be compromised.

However, the rarity of professions such as “specialist doctor” (Ad 185), and “senior lecturer” (Ad 293), two and five matrimonials respectively, alongside the absence of professions such as principal and professor in the matrimonials, may indicate that women of higher status within these fields access potential spouses through other means. At the same time, women who attain career stages such as principals, professors, and specialised medical doctors are older, and may either be already married or be considered too old or too high in status to advertise for marriage in newspapers.

Very few prospective brides are presented as being in the top tiers of the corporate industries. Only 38 (5.2%) matrimonials mention the prospective bride’s post as manager, administrator, consultant or director of a company. Examples include matrimonials where the prospective bride is in a “managerial position” (Ad 58), “a Director in private firm in Colombo” (Ad 201), “Senior Consultant in USA” (Ad 227) and “Assistant Director/Administrator in a reputed facility” (Ad 648). For an informed reader, being a director in a private firm in Colombo can indicate higher salaries, status and fluency in English. Being a senior consultant in the USA indicates that the prospective bride is a resident of a sought-after country, which would be a migrating opportunity for the suitor. It also demonstrates her capacity at her work, prestige and fluency in English enabling her to thrive in an English-speaking country such as the USA.

The smaller percentage of such matrimonials can be read in two ways. On one hand, women in high-ranking jobs such as principals, professors and managers both in state and the corporate sectors—being in the upper-strata English-speaking middle class—utilise means other than newspaper matrimonials to select potential grooms. On the other hand, it could also mean that there are fewer women in these positions. In comparison, 63 (8.64%) matrimonials mention executive-level career positions of the prospective bride: “(two) executive daughters” (Ad 2), “a Travel Executive in a Leading Travel Company” (Ad 414) and “Graduate executive officer” (Ad 29). Being a “graduate executive officer” (Ad 29) indicates not only the prospective bride’s educational expertise and therefore her intellectual capabilities, but also her professional expertise and leadership qualities. The data seems to indicate that urban middle-class women advertised in the newspaper matrimonials occupy positions in the lower-to-middle-tiers of the private sector more often than in the upper echelons of it.

By naming the type of employment or area of work, the matrimonial can be kept succinct yet effective, since it still provides key insights into not only the prospective bride’s educational qualifications but also the status of herself and her family. Thus, mentioning the prospective bride’s profession can signal her worth as a potential spouse with many prospects. As a society that assigns considerable value to such professions, a prospective bride thus presented in the Sri Lankan English newspaper matrimonials indicates prestige, financial stability, growth opportunities and a capacity for upward social mobility – all of which will be available to the suitor. It is, in essence, shorthand for multiple other factors.

Nevertheless, these advertisements reflect the gendered nature of these professions even among twenty-first century urban middle-class Sri Lankans, presenting these women as societal gender norm abiders, suitable for marriage within a patriarchal system. At the same time, we note that our data is not only an indication of gendered professions but also an indication of the sub-groups within the middle-class who seek arranged marriages through matrimonial advertisements.

Migrating brides

As already signalled in the previous sections, migration is a frequent feature in matrimonials and is also connected to education and career. Both internal (within the country) and external (out of Sri Lanka) migration are prominent in the matrimonials.

Six matrimonials (0.82% of the total matrimonials) mention internal migration. Using phrases such as “parents in Dehiwela...originally from Galle” (Ad 559), the prospective bride’s family indicates their history of internal migration. Sri Lankans still place value on regional affiliations, shown through ‘gama’ (village) or ‘hometown’ as places of familial origin. The reference to being ‘originally from Galle’ in Ad 559 can be seen as a subtle indication of desirability for furthering a Southern connection. At the same time, migration from a regional place of origin to the capital or suburbs signals urbanisation, and through this, a more sophisticated identity than that of a purely regional affiliation.

Decisions pertaining to external migration are presented in 33 (4.5%) matrimonials explicitly, while another 21 (2.9%) state that the prospective bride is a holder of a US Green card or permanent residence (PR) / citizenship of a foreign country. The countries/continents most commonly referred to are (from highest to lowest frequency): Australia, USA, UK, England, Canada,

New Zealand, Japan and Europe, with a single mention each for Hong Kong, Singapore and the Middle East. Taken together, these demonstrate the preferred migratory destinations of the middle classes. These migrations are undertaken in search of better jobs, quality education and an elevated lifestyle (Agadjanian, *et al.*, 2008), which will assist in their upward social mobility. Hence, prospective brides and their families advertising themselves as proponents of migration may be presenting themselves as better established and open to more opportunities, which may elevate their social status to be exchanged with other desirable characteristics of the potential spouse. Thus, external migration (and even internal migration towards urban areas) can indicate elevated social status and an opportunity for hypergamous marriage. However, this may be different in migration for marriage in minority communities in Sri Lanka (see Maunaguru, 2020). Issues related to marriage and migration, and the differences amongst Sri Lankan ethnic communities are identified as under-researched topics.

The prospective brides' residence abroad is mentioned by one hundred and sixty-eight (23.1%) matrimonials and is closely connected to education and career. Table 2 below tabulates the academic and professional qualifications mentioned among prospective brides residing abroad at the time of publication of the advertisement. A higher number of those residing abroad for study purposes are seen to be pursuing postgraduate qualifications, including PhDs. A majority of those residing abroad for work purposes hold postgraduate qualifications. Of these 168 matrimonials, 116 (69.1%) of the prospective brides with PR or citizenship in countries such as America, Australia, England, and Canada possess graduate- or higher-level qualifications. Only 28 (16.7%) of the 168 matrimonials did not refer to academic or professional qualifications, which may be construed as a presentation strategy that simply utilises the highly-valued social capital attached to a migrant status in affluent countries.

The numbers in Table 2 reveal the inclination among prospective brides of the Sri Lankan urban middle class to pursue higher studies (postgraduate especially) abroad. Women who have migrated to Western countries are usually viewed as highly accomplished. Accordingly, these women present their worth as future wives not only through the social capital attached to migration but also through the intellectual identities, socio-economic values and prospects of such an education.

Brides and grooms at risk of exclusion

Many strategies are employed in these matrimonials to circumvent characteristics in the prospective brides that could otherwise be traditionally considered unappealing in marriage. A prospective first-time bride's sexual history seems to be of extreme importance. Some of the more common criteria found unattractive relate to the prospective bride's prior marriage and, if so, whether she is 'encumbered' with children. Another trait that seems to be presented in a redeeming light is her age, which may have passed the socially accepted age for marriage. However, as this section will demonstrate further, these matrimonials also state or imply several exclusionary criteria for potentially interested grooms, which may seem hypocritical when considering the many measures those placing the matrimonials themselves take to avoid as much stigma as possible in the potential brides' presentation.

Due to the cultural taboo attached to premarital sex, especially regarding women (Hindin & Hindin, 2009), advertisers attempt to assure the potential partner of the prospective bride's virginity and lack of promiscuity through a range of terms. Such terms and phrases include "religious...daughter of moral values" (Ad 28), "unblemished character" (Ad 75), "with excellent character and brought up with Sri Lankan values" (Ad 88), and "possesses an excellent character" (Ad 127). By invoking the religious and cultural values of

Table 2: Highest academic and professional qualifications of prospective brides residing abroad for various reasons at the time of publishing the matrimonial

	PhD	Postgraduate qualifications	Graduate	Other qualifications	Mentions "qualified"	No qualifications mentioned
Living abroad	1	4	6	4	1	9
PR holder/citizenship	1	3	8	3	1	5
Work-related	4	17	8	2	2	10
Residing abroad to gain qualifications	22	30	11	12	-	4

the prospective bride, the attempt is to present her as virtuous.

Being presented in this manner is advantageous to the prospective bride, since a woman entering matrimony who will occupy the roles of a wife, and a potential mother is required to be virtuous. However, requiring premarital celibacy from a prospective bride may deprive her of pre-marital sexual rights or force her into presenting a falsified version of herself in the matrimonials, mainly to secure socially acceptable marriage prospects.

This is further seen in the presentation of prospective brides who are divorced or widowed. Among the 68 (9.3%) matrimonials of prospective brides seeking second marriages, certain phrases seem to indicate an attempt to mitigate the reluctance that a prospective groom might consider a once-married woman. This resonates with the findings by Vaillant & Harrant (2008), which demonstrate that being previously married or having dependent children can hinder securing a potential marriage partner. This may be one reason why statements like “no children” (as in Ad 7) and “no encumbrances” (as in Ad 55) are commonly employed in such matrimonials. However, within the data examined, eight prospective brides mentioned having children from their first marriage. Examples of such matrimonials include those stating that the prospective bride is “having a daughter in custody” (Ad 357) or is “mother of one son” (Ad 689). One even requests that the potential groom be an individual “who can become a loving father for (the prospective bride’s) daughter” (in Ad 319). The marriage ads seem to take it for granted that a potential husband may find marrying a woman with children undesirable. At the same time, the prospective bride with children may however present herself as fertile and capable of handling familial responsibility. Therefore, the presentation of a prospective bride with children in the matrimonials is a necessary risk.

As already mentioned, the age at potential marriage also seems to negatively affect women. Prospective brides ranging from 29 to 60+ years are presented as young in appearance. Phrases such as “very young looking” (in Ad 87 for a 48-year-old), “exceptionally young looking” (in Ad 161 for a 39-year-old), “young at heart” (in Ad 707 for a prospective bride in her mid-fifties) and “younger looking” (in Ad 177 for a 60-year-old) are examples of this phenomenon. By employing such expressions, these prospective brides and their families may be attempting to present youthful energy, health, and fertility—implying that she is still desirable despite being late to marry according to cultural norms. Prospective brides who have passed the socially dictated

age for marriage and are in search of a first marriage are introduced as the “unmarried daughter” (Ad 87) or as “never married” (Ad 133) to avoid the stigma attached to second marriages. In two matrimonials, the reason for the prospective bride’s delay in marrying is presented as due to “family responsibilities” (Ad 87) and “studies” (Ad 169), possibly to deflect any concern that a potential groom may have regarding their character and horoscope. Additionally, stating that “...even a divorce (sic) or widower...” (Ad 578) will be considered for the 49-year-old unmarried woman advertised in this matrimonial indicates the inferiority assigned to unmarried women, as this statement implies that men seeking second marriages are usually not an unmarried woman’s first option. Hence, many strategies seem to be employed in these matrimonials to mitigate the impact that ‘late’ age at potential marriage may have on these prospective brides. We note that despite findings in prior research that women marry later in Sri Lanka, there is still an ideal age for marriage for women as envisaged by society, and women who aspire to marry later than that age must provide ‘evidence’ or a ‘rationale’ for that.

When analysing these matrimonials, many forms of othering and exclusion of men who may be interested in replying can also be seen. While age, ethnic group, religion, caste, height, complexion, occupation or profession, residence, migration status or preferences, marital status, and horoscope details (among others) construct a formidable set of standards, these also serve as exclusionary standards. For example, potential grooms may be excluded if they do not fall within the desired height or complexion, as in this matrimonial: “seek fair complexioned handsome...son of more than 5’ 7” in height” (Ad 38). Caste-based exclusion is common when matrimonials say “Govigama (caste) only” (Ad 59). Other exclusionary examples are “Non-malefic horoscopes only” (Ad 62), “academic Doctor professional is sought” (Ad 76), and “Divorcees please do not reply” (Ad 667).

Furthermore, a fruitful illustration of exclusion as performed in matrimonials can be shown using the ‘migration’ criteria of these advertisements. Of the 168 matrimonials citing migration, 51 (6.99% of the 729) matrimonials with parents in the diasporic community or with the prospective bride resident abroad, prefer a potential husband located in the diaspora. This is demonstrated by examples such as “Australian PR Holders or citizen preferred” (Ad 171), “preferred [potential groom] already in Melbourne” (Ad 424), “Those living in US/UK/Canada preferred” (Ad 514), and “Preferably based in USA” (Ad 547). Our data shows that only four matrimonials consider locally settled prospective grooms to be acceptable. This is a clear

example of exclusion. Hence, it may be construed that convenience, the similarity of a diasporic lifestyle, the norms and values of a diasporic community coupled with other middle-class characteristics are gradually taking precedence over preserving one's identity and culture by marrying into Sri Lanka-based/Sinhala families with similar characteristics (though this may be different outside the Sinhalese community).

Hence, it can be deduced that, apart from these matrimonials serving as sites for circumventing "undesirable" characteristics on the part of the prospective brides, they simultaneously exclude interested potential grooms based on several traditionally enforced criteria and the implicit requirement of belonging to the English-speaking middle class. This is outside the main focus of this paper but is a fruitful area for future research.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we looked at matrimonial advertisements published in English-language newspapers as a means of analysing the presentation of potential brides in terms of class-related characteristics. Through this, we offer an examination of the portrayal of the social status of a prospective bride and her family. Several attributes that make up social status are showcased through the matrimonial advertisement, where the bride, the family and the potential groom are described. This includes fluency in English, places of education, financial assets, family status, and profession; all of which are characteristics of class membership since colonial times. While English may be rarely addressed explicitly, we illustrate how it is intricately tied to other markers that are desirable in the potential bride. In the last section, we also presented gendered and classed aspects that are considered undesirable in prospective brides and grooms. We also used this study as an opportunity to present a specialised register of Sri Lankan English as related to marriage, the register used in the specific genre of matrimonials.

This study therefore records how marriageable women are presented in Sri Lankan society (even when they are expatriates) and also in what way the social expectations of marriage affect present-day Sri Lankans. While the study has limitations tied to its choice to consider only English-language matrimonials, it still illustrates trends in marriage in contemporary Sri Lanka. It also exemplifies the dire need for more research on marriage in connection to social class and related matters of education, career, migration issues, language(s), and gendered norms, including any shifts that have been taking place over the last century.

ENDNOTES

- 1 A well-known example of a register is 'legalese', or the legal register. A less well-known example of a register is the register used in acknowledgements.
- 2 The placement of the Sun, and the planets Mars (Kuja), Saturn (Shani) and two mythical celestial aspects of the lunar nodes (Rahu and Ketu) are considered harmful, i.e. malefic, when placed in specific regions ('houses') of the horoscope.
- 3 Govi, Karava and Salagama are Sinhala castes. The 'Govigama' caste ('Govi' in short) is originally said to denote the agricultural people; the 'Karava' caste is traditionally associated with the fishing trade; 'Salagama' is traditionally associated with the cultivation of cinnamon, weaving and being soldiers.
- 4 Victor Munck's work (de Munck, 1988; 1996) is on a rural community of Muslim people.
- 5 'Private schools' are government-approved schools providing education in the local curriculum, that function independently. 'International schools' are educational institutions available in urban areas that offer education via Edexcel or Cambridge curriculum (and sometimes the local national syllabus) and teach in the English medium. They are registered as companies.
- 6 The Grama Sevaka (i.e., GS) is a public official appointed by the Sri Lankan government to carry out administrative duties in a sub-unit of a divisional secretariat.

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