

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Solidarity Marriage or Sham Marriage? Marriage as Radical Political Solidarity among and with Migrants in Europe

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Abstract. Western societies hold dearly to the romantic heterosexual model of marriage. This model, which is seemingly based upon ‘love’ also relies on perceptions of racialized, economic, and identitarian similarity of the people in the relationship. This article discusses a non-mainstream form of marriage as implicit political solidarity with or among migrants. It critically analyses a form of marriage that is often categorized under the general notion of ‘sham marriage’ by adopting a life story narrative approach. Instead of the legal and normative terminologies, I use ‘solidarity (inter-)marriage’ to refer to the specific form of marriages based upon social inequality between the spouses and a sense of altruistic support with migrants. Solidarity marriage can deconstruct the existing discourses of marriage and family that cling to an individualistic notion of love- or interest-driven partnership. The article concludes with an argument in favor of the de-racialization of bi-national (inter-)marriages and the problematization of currently implemented legal and social discourses in identifying ‘authentic’ marriages and family units.

Keywords: *life story, love, migration, racialization, sham marriage, solidarity*

Introduction

According to the Cambridge English dictionary, ‘solidarity is an agreement between and support for the members of a group, especially a political group’ (Ter Meulen and Wright 2010). Solidarity is associated with mutual respect, personal support, and commitment to a common cause (Durkheim and Lukes 2013 ed.). It has also been used to conceptualize the bonds and commitments within a ‘family’ unit and between the persons tied with filial ties. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim has been one of the most cited social scholars who discussed solidarity and its transformation in western contexts (Durkheim and Lukes 2013 ed.). The notion of

solidarity has already been used to explain the changes in the modern family model and, consequently, to reflect the historical transformation of what brings people together to form families. For instance, Roderic Beaujot and Zenaida Ravanera (2008) draw on Durkheim's notions of *mechanical* and *organic* solidarity to argue that as societies have evolved and families are no longer units of economic production, they need not be based on a division of labor, and can thus be held together by a sense of shared identity and values (Beaujot and Ravanera 2008).

While in mechanical solidarity, the emphasis is on the likeness and cohesion among the people, in organic solidarity, the emphasis is on the diversity between the solidary parties. In the latter, the distinct functions that individuals fulfill in the division of labor make them interesting to each other (Thijssen 2012, 455-456). This form of solidarity is not equivalent to *equality*. The patterns of power responsibility, care, and commitment will differ between the partners because of their different functions (Barlow 2015; Rahbari 2019a). Inequality makes solidarity even more necessary since, in the lack of an even distribution of resources and privileges, it is only possible to guarantee social and economic survival for everyone by using human inventories of care and commitment instead of an economic driver. Solidarity is thus a requirement, especially when social and economic conditions are not justly or evenly distributed.

When it comes to people forming companionships through marriage in the contemporary world, the solidarity between the parties is often organic and based on differences, collaborations, and labor divisions that are not based on or lead to equality between them. Therefore, terms such as 'family solidarity' and 'filial solidarity' should ideally refer to mutual support and obligations in the modern family life and would entail a collective altruistic moral and economic perspective rather than a purely individualistic notion of autonomy (See, for, e.g., Barlow 2015).

However, the notion of 'family' in 'family solidarity' can in itself be scrutinized. Contemporary western societies hold dearly to the heterosexual romantic model of marriage (Roca and Enguix 2015). This model is seemingly based upon the notion of heteronormative romantic 'love.' This notion of love predominant in concepts of heteronormative relationships in the modern world is based on 'emotional connections.' It is reinforced and codified through narratives by multiple media (Gutekunst 2015) and popular discourse. Marriage is, however, about more than love and is also reliant on perceptions of racialized, economic, and identitarian similarity of the people involved in it. This means that inter-marriages



across different religions, ethnic backgrounds, racialized and classed identities, embodiments, and (dis)abilities are not as normalized as marriages within each of these categories. Therefore, while family solidarity might have historically evolved to rely on differences in gendered patterns of labor, it does not specifically welcome differences across other social factors. Quite the opposite, when differences based on factors such as – but not limited to – nationality, age, and ethnic background are involved, the authenticity of ‘love’ and as its naturalized consequence, ‘family’ is likely to be put under scrutiny by the society if not by the legal state apparatus. A stark example of the official and legal systematic inquisition and questioning can be found in the procedures to investigate ‘realness’ and ‘fakeness’ of marriages in the context of bi-national marriage and marriage migration in Europe. In bi-national marriages – by which I mean marriages between EU nationals and the so-called third-country nationals – a perceived deviation from the heteronormative, romantic, and similarity-based marriage model can lead to skepticism towards the authenticity of marriage at best and criminalization of the relationship at worst.

Substantial scholarly inquiry has already been conducted on marriage migration discourses in the Global North (See, for e.g., Wray 2016). This scholarship has revealed the gaps, analytical and methodological issues in the study of marriage migration (See, for e.g., Scheel and Gutekunst 2019), as well as problems with the political and social discourses surrounding it (Spencer and Charsley 2016). In this paper, I also take issue with the legal and social conceptualizations of ‘sham marriage’ in Europe, which characterize relationships that do not comply with the mainstream western ideals of ‘love’ and ‘family.’ However, I take a different course of action than other studies by attempting to conceptualize the ‘sham’ in some marriages as acts of political solidarity. Doing this, I employ the notion of solidarity to problematize the ‘sham marriage’ discourse and show how marriage has been used as a radical and implicit form of activism.

The main question I ask in this paper is, ‘how can the notion of family solidarity be used in solidarity marriage with or among migrants to go beyond the classic relationship model characterized by similarity and heteronormative romantic ideals?’ To explore the answer to this question, I adopt a life story narrative method to provide an example of how both notions of ‘solidarity’ and ‘family’ can be extended and pushed beyond the heteronormative, racialized, and neoliberal argumentations that often surround them in social and legal discourses of ‘sham marriage.’

The research method and context

In my research to find participants who had experienced ‘sham marriage’ first hand, I rapidly realized that – quite expectedly – it was a challenging topic to get people to talk about, without them trying to distance themselves from it. What made things difficult was that I wanted to know what the experience meant in the life course of the people who were themselves involved in ‘sham marriage’ arrangements. I wanted to know what kind of bonds this type of marriage created, how it was communicated to begin with, and how it affected the dynamics of power in the relationship. After an initial search period and unsuccessful attempts to recruit participants in Belgium through my extended network of migrants, I adopted a life story narrative method. The choice of method was thus initially affected by the difficulties of sampling willing participants. This method, however, proved particularly useful to analyze the narrative, as life stories reveal the effects of macro-historical and micro-personal events in the development of a personal story (Rahbari 2019c), and are, therefore, useful methodological tools to deeply connect and understand the connections between micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors affecting lifecourses and individuals. I had to dig deep in my connections to find someone willing to talk to me. Eventually, to be able to write this paper, I had to look for a woman called Ziba (pseudonym).

I first met Ziba some years ago back in Tehran when I was still living in Iran, and she was visiting Iran with her husband. Oliver, Ziba’s husband, was a European man.¹ Ziba and Oliver were like any other newly married couple, affectionate, friendly, and inseparable. Ziba was a charming and observant woman who listened attentively to others and shared her ideas generously. Oliver did not speak Farsi and always stayed behind in conversations. Because of his distinctly white and European appearance and stature, Oliver received much more attention on the streets of Tehran than anyone would ever wish for. Ziba, who was born and raised in Tehran, had moved to Europe to pursue higher education. There, she had met Oliver; she had moved in with him; and after some months of cohabitation, they had gotten married. At the time, a group of friends and I met Ziba and Oliver in Tehran as a part of our regular gatherings. Oliver and Ziba soon shared with us that they had recently gotten married and explained that they had what is called a ‘platonic’ relationship and without physical intimacy. They

¹ All names are pseudonyms; information on the countries of residence, nationalities, specific dates, and other personal and contextual information are diligently pseudonymized with the help of Ziba to secure their anonymity.



further explained that they had the type of marriage that in Europe would be considered a ‘sham marriage.’

In my search for a participant, I looked for Ziba, and I found her with little difficulty, thanks to the Internet’s magic. Although her hair color had changed – from a burned platinum blond to a vibrant red – there was no way that I would ever forget Ziba’s unique ear-to-ear mesmerizing smile. When I made contact with her, she did not remember me at first. I had to drop a few names to remind her of who I was. Thankfully, she had a very vague memory of me and consented to speak to me anonymously. We had barely interacted directly when we had met in Tehran, as she was a friend of a friend, and that was the only period we ever met. Now a European citizen, busy working woman, mother, and still married to Oliver, Ziba found my research interest amusing. ‘Why do you research this topic?’ she asked me. I told her that the inspiration had come to me in the past few years, noticing that the authenticity of many marriages between European nationals and non-European, as well as their love and care for, or interest in each other, were prone to social suspicion and sometimes legal challenge. I was interested in how European protectionist discourses justified systematic research in personal and private matters, for vetting ‘legitimate’ marriages and exposing ‘fake’ ones.

However, my interest went beyond that. I had an academic interest in modes of practicing ‘feminist’ solidarity. The truth is that witnessing the ‘criminal’ cases of Carola Rackete and Pia Klemp, who were both boat captains who were criminally charged for saving refugees from drowning in the Mediterranean, has sparked my interest in unorganized solidarity practices (Sanderson 2019). Their cases had also made me wonder how far the criminalization apparatus would go to minimize acts of solidarity with migrants and refugees. Then the solidarity activism and campaigns that supported Carola and Pia had got me thinking if there was a possibility to find similar support with non-mainstream forms of solidarity with migrants and refugees, for instance, solidarity-marriage, which I will talk about in this paper, using Ziba’s life story.

Ziba’s narrative

To Ziba, the period when her marriage was dubbed inappropriate, and even criminal seemed distant. Despite being a very ‘odd’ memory that felt distant to her, she explained that having started her relationship with Oliver like that had permanently affected what they had built together. ‘We were best friends before being a couple,’ she explained. Their relationship had been ‘full of ups and downs,’

and there were moments where they had come close to breaking it up. However, that was just 'like any other relationship,' Ziba emphasized a few times. When Ziba and Oliver became romantically involved – after a period of being married and being in what they called a 'platonic' relationship – Ziba had initially questioned her own feelings towards Oliver. Ziba had sometimes wondered whether she was entering into the relationship because she felt she owed it to Oliver. After all, Oliver was the person with the privilege of being a European citizen. He was also the person who had both economic stability and the power to help Ziba gain citizenship and stability. This feeling of uncertainty about her emotions had complicated and sometimes upset the dynamics of their relationship. They had talked about it to each other many times. It all 'eventually worked itself out,' Ziba explained, while emphasizing that in any other marriage, similar dynamics might exist for other reasons, such as unemployment of one partner or class and racial differences. She believed that it was never 'a hundred percent one reason' that attracts people to each other.

When I met Ziba in Tehran, she had not shied away from discussing her marriage conditions with us. She explained that she and Oliver had married so that she would be able to get a residence card and become a European citizen in the long run. Getting married had been Oliver's suggestion, who was then only a friend.² Oliver's suggestion had nothing to do with them starting a romantic relationship. They did not have intentions of ever starting one at that point. They loved each other 'in a different way' and enjoyed living together. After thinking it through and deciding to get married, however, the agreement between them was to live together and keep being married as long as necessary, even if their friendship faded away. There was no exchange of money or goods between them for the purpose of this arrangement, and there was never any mention of a debt or expectation of gratefulness. Imaginably, there was a strong mutual trust between them that made such an arrangement possible. They told us, the group of friends in Tehran, that they had not shared their 'secret' with many friends back in Europe where they lived, but with 'a select few' who would 'understand' them, indicating that they were very conscious of the interpretations that existed from their relationship and the possible repercussions. This was the first time I heard about 'sham marriages,' and to be frank, it did not interest me at the time. I do not remember giving it too much thought.

² The specific reason why citizenship was important to Ziba is left out intentionally as it has the potential to risk her anonymity.

What I do remember is, however, how Ziba and Oliver found a moment of solidarity in that small group of young Iranians – including myself – that met them a few times during their journey. The fact that the ‘secret’ was shared with us indicated Ziba and Oliver’s perception of us as ‘people who would understand’ and a sign of their consciousness about the differential powers of testimonies. As Iranian citizens living in Iran, our testimonies would not have held the same validity as European citizens. We did not pose a threat to them. I remember that another young Iranian woman in the same group (whom I will call with the pseudonym Azadeh) used the opportunity created by Ziba’s disclosure to share a secret with us about her own marriage. Azadeh explained that she, too, had married for ‘alternative’ reasons with her Iranian boyfriend. However, in her case, Azadeh and her boyfriend had decided to have their union legalized so that they would be able to live with each other under the same roof in Tehran. They could only live together as a legally married couple as Iran’s strict laws did not – and still do not – allow for cohabitation without being married. A temporary marriage was thus the best solution for them.³

On the one hand, Azadeh’s story resonated with Ziba’s, although there were fundamental differences in the problems they faced. Azadeh’s premarital sexual relationship was not sanctioned by the state. She had to get married to the man she was already dating to legalize her relationship and control her private space. Unlike Ziba, Azadeh was, in fact, encouraged to marry by the Iranian state, even for a temporary period.⁴ Azadeh’s marriage was not based on a classic notion of ‘love,’ not because it was not romantic but because it was not intended to last ‘forever.’ Similarly, in the case of Ziba, her marriage to Oliver was not legal because she did not marry him with the intention of staying married forever, or out of romantic ‘love.’ Ziba and Azadeh’s stories were also similar in that they both used the legal possibilities offered to them to reach personal goals. In doing so, they had built bonds of solidarity and mutual trust with their partners that went against both the societal and legal norms of their social contexts. On the other hand, Ziba’s story had

³ I have to emphasize that this does not mean that people do not do this. Throughout years of research in Iran, I have met many people of all sexes and genders who were in a relationship and secretly lived with each other without being married.

⁴ Temporary marriage is a type of marriage in Shi’a Islam in which the duration of the marriage is predefined and can last as long as the partners agree up on (from a day to months, or years). It does not involve a divorce process as it expires automatically after the pre-defined period. Iranian government promotes the practice to discourage youth from having sexual relationships outside of a religious marriage, but temporary marriage is in fact unpopular and stigmatized in the society (Rahbari 2019b).

made it possible for Azadeh to open up about her own marriage arrangement. The exchange of narratives invited solidarity and amplified understanding and empathy.

Today, I ask myself, what made our small group of friends in Tehran so empathetic towards Ziba and Azadeh? And what makes such marriages difficult to perceive people who oppose them, specifically in the European context. Why was it that Ziba and Oliver's story did not alarm us? And even quite the opposite, it was quickly left behind in our conversations as we moved on to other topics. Why did we not question Ziba and Oliver as an illegitimate married couple? In other words, what is the rationale that makes certain unions 'sham' or 'legitimate' in different contexts, and what alternative readings are possible from Ziba's story and those stories similar to hers? This paper is as much an attempt to answer these questions as it is an exploratory investigation for solidarity. My focus in this paper is on marriages between two people who are on the same page on their marriage goals. I discuss marriages where only one of the partners has alternative motives for marriage, as the relationship dynamics would be different in such cases. Throughout this text, I will continuously use quotation marks referring to 'sham marriages' to show my reluctance to essentialize the term's definition and avoid generalizing the normative readings of it to the case I discuss in this paper and other humanly possible scenarios.

Why and how to rethink 'sham marriages'

Ziba's story is one of many out of the ordinary experiences that silently exist out there. It is hardly a representative example, yet it shares an essential element with lots of other stories. If it 'comes out,' it is criminalized. To understand why Ziba's marriage was considered a 'sham,' one should understand the legal definition of the term. Marriages such as Ziba's are criminalized because the legal definition of 'sham marriage' in many countries in Europe – including Belgium where I am located – and North America is based on the suspicion that in the (inter-)marriages of bi-national couples, at least one of the parties might be entering the marriage union to acquire residence or citizenship rights, rather than building a lasting marital relationship (*Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering n.d.*). This suspicion is built upon a few assumptions: that there is a hierarchy of 'intentions,' and some intentions could be considered illegitimate; that a conventional marriage should be intended as a lasting commitment; and if a person marries to get residence or citizenship rights, then the marriage is not a 'real' union but a 'sham.'

While the law emphasizes that marriage is a right, it does not treat all intentions equally. The distinction made between intentions– as I will discuss later – and

between people is one of the many things that makes this 'sham marriage' discourse problematic. Policing and surveillance of bi-national spouses' intimate lives by government authorities is a way that the suspicion is put into practice, despite having been criticized by human rights activists (Rushchenko 2016). It is clear that it is absolutely fine to marry someone to access financial means, status, fame, etc. as long as both partners are European. Still, it is deemed a criminal act to seek better living conditions through resettlement and acquiring residency rights in another country. This distinction is very clearly made between people with undesirable and privileged nationalities.

It is hard to dismiss that people always judge the intentions of marriage partners when they perceive them to be acting beyond the normative form, or as discussed earlier, where they are perceived to be 'different.' It is very well possible that the marriage of a person of a lower class with a person of a higher class would be perceived 'non-romantic' or problematic. When there is a large age-gap between the couples or a large class-difference, it is often assumed that one partner is a 'gold digger,' a term that is also highly sexist. In fact, there are arrangements outside of the migration context that look very similar to the 'sham marriage' phenomenon. The Sugar Daddy/Mommy phenomenon, for instance, is an example: an adult young and attractive man/woman enters a relationship with a man/woman of wealth who is older (hence, called Daddies and Mommies to highlight the age gap and financing capacity). Both parties know what the other one desires: sex and beauty on the one side and/or financial support on the other. This type of relationship is not common but also not criminalized. Not so long ago, many people around the world mourned for the man who created Playboy,⁵ not only the magazine, but also the lifestyle that was based on capitalized on the commodification of sex (Kent 2002, 337), on exchanging men's money for women's beauty and sexuality. These arrangements have even been called empowering and emancipating for young women (Handy 2019). Thus, it is crucial to distinguish between the social attitudes that contribute to recognizing marriages as 'romantic' or 'manipulative' and the legal inquisition to recognize marriages as such. It is only after adding migration/residence/citizenship rights to the formula that the legal framework and its inquisitive machine comes into play.

⁵ Hugh Hefner was the founder and editor-in-chief of Playboy magazine that turned into a globally known luxury brand associated with the allure of sexual pleasure. His death on September 27, 2017 sparked a decades-long discussion on his impact and imagery.

In contemporary social regimes, we consider it inscrutable to scrutinize poor people's marriage intentions. It would be considered classist to imagine a law that would allow such scrutiny. This does not mean that people do not marry with the intention of financial stability, but that most legal systems⁶ have moved beyond investigating people's intentions to sanction marriages. The question is then, how is it that the discourse around 'sham marriage' that scrutinizes the intentions of people based on their nationality normalized? The discourse around 'sham marriage' – contrary to what is often discussed – is not based upon intentions, but rather on the intender. The legal intervention to criminalize 'sham marriage' is not the marriage itself, but to keep introducing measures to fortify the borders further and reduce the movement of the 'invaders.' There is a growing anxiety, and moral panic over the power of family ties to perpetuate immigration flows in European migration discourses (Charsley et al. 2020).

The invasion rhetoric in world politics – from Donald Trump's Hispanic 'invasion' of America (Varela 2019) to Geert Wilders's 'Islamic invasion' of Netherlands (Wildman 2017) – dominates migration narratives. The political, moral panic around the migration 'crisis' ironically targets human mobility to which the Euro-American politics have historically contributed. Moreover, this moral panic does not stay in the realm of formal politics. Some mediatized and popularized versions of it causes similar harm to the political rhetoric. The reality TV show *90 Day Fiancé* is a notable example of vulgar popularized racism that uses the idea 'sham marriage' as one of its central themes, without naming it.

While not located in Europe, *90 Day Fiancé* captures the spirit of distrustfulness towards the intentions of EU non-nationals. The show follows some USA citizens who want to get married to non-US nationals. The couples have to apply for a visa, which allows a USA citizen to bring over a future spouse from another country. However, once the fiancé acquires the visa and arrives in the USA, the clock is ticking. The couple has 90 days to get married, or else the visa expires, and the fiancé must go back to their home country (Sheffield 2018). It is an example of how horrible people with foreign passports– especially people of color from the Global South – get portrayed in the media as thirsty for green-cards and dreaming of citizenship and the 'American dream.' Opposite to this representation of non-

⁶ Even though the legal systems might not intervene in marriages, social structures do restrict marriages based on many factors, from sexuality, race and class to physical strength and beauty.



Americans, USA citizens are often presented as hardworking, honest, and gullible victims who are merely looking for 'love.' Even when the relationship is portrayed well, the risk of the non-American partner leaving the American one after getting residence rights is amplified in the narratives. While there are few stories of successful (inter-)marriages of bi-national couples in the show, there is a constant narrative of suspicion towards non-Americans that, mixed with a dose of dramatized name-calling, creates a caricature of foreigners as cunning invaders.

Similarly, in the case of migrants who marry European nationals, the risk of 'sham' marriages is considered so high that a system is put in place to vet all marriages and detect such arrangements. In terms of the right to residence, without a doubt, living in a country without having long-term residence rights introduces administrative complications and a lack of rights in that specific context. In this sense, having a longer-term residence and gaining citizenship is, most of the time, an advantage if compared to a shorter-term residence permit in many contexts. However, the problematic aspects of marriage screenings, as 90 Day Fiancé clearly and quite trivially shows, setting legal boundaries for testing marriage compatibility and policing the intentions of the candidates is an indication of heavily racialized and prejudiced regimes. The whole discussion around 'sham marriage' is built on a narrow notion of 'love,' according to which Ziba and Oliver's relationship would have been disqualified.

Additionally, the assumption that gaining residence is a definite advantage for migrants and refugees should be assessed. Migrant lives are much more complicated than this homogenized picture of seeking 'good' and escaping 'evil.' Painting migrants with the brush of 'disadvantaged-ness' is a reductionist point of entry to the discussion. There are simply too many possible narratives of migration and movement to be named. I chose one specific narrative to illustrate how heteronormative romantic love can be flawed in providing us frameworks to evaluate solidarity and care in relationships. In the next section, I expand the notion of solidarity and its role in deconstructing 'sham marriage' discourses.

Discussion: marriage as radical solidarity

In the previous sections, I highlighted some of the legal and social discourses around 'sham marriages' in Europe. By this point, I have come far enough to complicate the discourses around bi-national (inter-)marriages to refuse to use the term 'sham' anymore. I have concluded that marriage is a social contract that should

not and cannot be defined by forms of intimacy, duration, or intentions. I am therefore going to use solidarity marriage to refer to unions that take place after an open mutual negotiation between the partners, be it to lower their taxes through marriage, sharing financial burdens, battling loneliness, gaining temporary residence rights, acquiring citizenship, or any other reasons that only involve the parties in the relationship and do not cause otherwise avoidable pain or damage to anyone around them. I acknowledge that this is not a perfect term, as many marriages involve different forms of solidarity. However, by adding the 'solidarity' to marriage, I highlight that some marriages do indeed fall outside of the normalized happily-ever-after romantic forms of legal marital union. I also fully acknowledge the limitations of my discussion as it has not criticized the 'coupledom' problematic in marriage discourses, that other and delegitimize relationships between more than two people. This topic has received substantial critique in social scholarship (See for, e.g., Emens 2004).

I argue that solidarity marriages should not be seen as less valuable than romantic coupledom and are not rare. Alternative forms of love, care, and friendship are present and everywhere. While not always considered 'partnership' or officially registered as 'marriage,' solidarity-based relationships are prevalent and part of a broader civil movement. Sharing space, resources, care, time, emotions, and labor for the sake of humanitarian and altruistic values – whether wrapped in romance or not – are some ways of solidarizing. Civil activism in support of migrants and refugees is also a global movement aimed at protesting the lack of existing options for the legalization of migrants, border surveillance, and selective approach to political membership (Rushchenko 2016). Local people of Brussels hosting refugees in their houses, feeding the homeless on the streets, and other organized or spontaneous initiatives have proven to have the capacity to undermine systems of discrimination, even though temporarily. Therefore, solidarity can be used to go beyond the classic relationship model characterized by heteronormative romantic ideals.

I discuss that this framework of solidarity based on social inequality proves especially useful to deconstruct the existing discourses of marriage and family that cling to an interest-driven interpretation of partnership. The latter individualistic notion of partnership views partners as separate atomized individuals who look for maximum gain in the relationship. They are thus seen as either vulnerable and/or predatory, usually based on their social locations they occupy based on gender, age, color, nationality, class, etc. This interpretation can lead to the presumptions that



reduce marriage to a static institution based on intentions, and individual and social gains. Stepping outside this framework, however complicated, is not impossible. Western societies hold on very dearly to the romantic-heterosexual marriage model with a pinch of racialized and classed similarity. The discourse of similarity emphasizes a vague idea of 'shared' identity rather than diversity and care. While an alternative mode seems non-existent in mainstream policy and social discourses, they are practiced more widely than most of us want to acknowledge. Marriage strategies and the unpaid labor of women in family businesses are examples for strengthening intra-ethnic solidarity and expanding the social networks of migrant groups (Erel 2012, 463). Not all solidarity marriages involve exchange processes and financial benefits; some are merely interpreted as ethical and humanitarian practices. In Germany, for instance, there is a 'protection marriage' movement of bi-national marriages aimed to provide migrants with residency rights. The movement is tied to left-wing political activism, promotes self-governance, and encourages critique of governmental decisions, thus rationalizing narratives of 'protection marriage' (see Rushchenko 2016) that promote solidarity marriage to protect migrants.

In this paper, I drew on Ziba's life story to illustrate how solidarity marriage can and does occur despite the mainstream identity protectionism in Europe. Marriages and partnerships involve different forms of relationships and do not necessarily build around identitarian similarities. Moving away from the identity-oriented perception of marriage and reformulating coupledness and partnership are not difficult tasks. 'Alternative' practices of marriage and partnership already exist. However, a radical reformulation and dismantling of mainstream social ideas and policies on marriage, love, and care require more scholarly and activist work. It is only through the problematization of the heteronormative romantic coupledness discourses can we de-racialize the frameworks that define partnership and marriage.

I have attempted to answer my main question using Ziba's. I explained how the discourses around illegitimacy of certain marriages are built and presented an alternative way of looking at solidarity marriages as a radical form of social solidarity. There is also the question of why some people can sympathize with this form of solidarity, and in contrast, others consider it wrong and immoral if not criminal. While this latter question deserves an exploration of its own, in the case of Ziba entrusting her narrative with us, and the reason why my Iranian friends and I did not read Ziba's story as a sham, could be partly found in our politics of location.

Politics of location, theorized by feminist scholar Adrienne Rich (2003, initially published in 1984) are the identity and experiential positions of people within specificities of their contexts based on different embodiments and identity markers such as – but not limited to – gender, sexual orientation, nationality, class, race, religion, age, religion, disability (Rich 2003). For us, being Iranian youth meant being perceived as radicals quite often, if not always. Even sitting together in mixed sex-groups, shaking hands, talking, and laughing, we probably broke some laws. Living on the cutting edge of the law, we had weaponized crossing legal boundaries to survive. However, we did not only break the laws. We also used them to attain our versions of justice, like Azadeh’s legal marriage, that was not meant for a long-lasting partnership but temporary cohabitation and pleasure. Furthermore, we had not been prone to western fearmongering and migrant-bashing discourses, let alone discussions on faking marriages. We were also on the other side of the walls of the European border. We were the recipients of suspicion and confined within the borders of our country. This was not because our government restricted our movement, but because our passports had been rendered undesirable by global politics. Our bodies were perceived as risky, and our presence an exception, if not a disturbance. Having a different history and knowing the implications of politics of location in Ziba’s case gave us a different standpoint.

My discussion in this paper has mostly been oriented towards an unapologetic argument in favor of the de-racialization of bi-national (inter-)marriages. For the sake of argument, I have assumed that couples might marry for ‘out of the ordinary’ reasons outside of forming long-lasting sexual-romantic partnerships. My intention has been to problematize how the so-called ‘sham marriage’ is publicly and legally portrayed. I showed that the assumptions behind ‘sham marriage’ are plausible and unfounded if compared to marriages outside of the migration context. I have intentionally gone to the extremes to discuss that even if the ‘worst-case scenarios’ were real, the processes of inquisition and investigation into forms of relationship that are named problematic are neither justified nor just. As Ziba’s story shows, marriages like hers have a potential for radical solidarity. It has not been my intention to argue that scamming does not occur in the context of marriage. There are certainly forms of abuse and scams in this sphere, but it is important to note that they are not limited to the migration context. Additionally, suspecting every bi-national marriage tends to overestimate a very marginal practice of scamming. I argue that the mainstream ‘scam marriage’ discourses that inspect

and surveil the bodies and minds of migrants create and perpetuate the racialized narratives of the 'other.' The 'sham marriage' discourse is used in the service of the greater political apparatus that aims to control, if not entirely deter, 'undesired' immigration.

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