



Marriageable Brides in Kerala: A Feminist Critical Discourse Study of Malayalam Matrimonial Ads (2015–2024)

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Article information

Received: 11th February 2026

Received in revised form: 23rd March 2026

Accepted: 15th April 2026

Available online: 20th May 2026

Volume: 1

Issue: 2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20372753>

Abstract

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) account for nearly 74% of global mortality and are the leading cause of premature death in India. Kerala, despite its relatively high human development indicators, exhibits a disproportionately high NCD burden due to advanced epidemiological transition, dietary shifts, and population ageing. However, the co-occurrence of major cardiometabolic conditions—hypertension, diabetes, and obesity (the “triple burden”) remains insufficiently examined. A multistage cluster-sampled cross-sectional survey was conducted from January to August 2024 among 3,540 adults aged 18–69 years across four districts of Kerala. The WHO STEPwise approach was employed, incorporating behavioural assessment, anthropometric and blood pressure measurements, and biochemical evaluation including fasting glucose and HbA1c. Standard international and Asia-Pacific criteria were used to define conditions. Multivariable logistic regression identified determinants of individual conditions and the triple-burden phenotype. Prevalence estimates were 31.4% for hypertension, 20.8% for diabetes, 42.6% for generalised obesity, and 53.1% for central obesity. The triple-burden phenotype was present in 11.7% of participants. Significant predictors included age ≥ 45 years (aOR 4.82), male sex (aOR 1.34), family history of NCDs (aOR 2.16), physical inactivity (aOR 1.71), and central obesity (aOR 3.04). An inverted U-shaped association between education and NCD risk was observed, with the highest burden among those with mid-level education. These findings highlight a substantial clustered cardiometabolic risk in Kerala. Integrated prevention strategies targeting sedentary lifestyles, central obesity, and high-risk households are essential, alongside strengthening primary prevention under national NCD control programmes.

Keywords: - Matrimonial Advertisements; Critical Discourse Analysis; Feminist Methodology; Colorism; Caste; Intersectionality; Kerala; Print Media.

Introduction

The matrimonial advertisement occupies an unusual position in the contemporary Indian public sphere. As Patricia Uberoi (2006, 23) observed, the genre is at once intensely personal each advertisement represents a specific family’s search for a particular kind of partner and rigorously formulaic, with conventions of representation so well-established that experienced readers can decode an advertisement’s implicit caste, class, and ideological positioning within seconds. The genre therefore offers feminist scholars a rare opportunity: a textual archive in which the discursive construction of marriageable femininity and masculinity is rendered explicit on the printed page rather than reconstructed from ethnographic observation.

Feminist scholarship on the Indian marriage market has examined the institution of arranged marriage through ethnographic (Mody 2008; Donner 2008), demographic (Caldwell, Reddy, and Caldwell 1983), and political-economic (Palriwala and Uberoi 2008; Kodoth 2008) lenses. The matrimonial advertisement as a

discursive object, however, has received less systematic feminist attention, particularly in the post-2010 era of online portals, mobile-app matchmaking, and the partial reorganisation of print media around digital convergence. The most influential earlier studies Lessinger (2002) on diasporic Indian advertisements and Niranjana (1999) on English-language Indian matrimonial copy predate the contemporary configuration and require updating. Kerala-specific scholarship on matrimonial discourse, despite the state's long tradition of newspaper-based matchmaking and its distinctively literate public, is thin (Kodoth 2008; Devika 2007).

Three features of the Kerala matrimonial landscape make it a particularly apt site for analysis. First, Malayalam-language print media retain unusually high readership and cultural authority in Kerala compared with most other Indian states, with the Sunday matrimonial sections of Malayala Manorama, Mathrubhumi, and Deepika continuing to attract substantial advertising volume into the 2020s. Second, Kerala's religious diversity a Hindu majority alongside substantial Muslim and Christian populations produces a matrimonial market that is internally segmented but operates within a shared discursive framework. Third, the long Gulf migration cycle has produced a distinctive matrimonial sub-category the "Gulf groom" that is empirically present in Kerala in ways that have no clear parallel elsewhere in India (Osella and Osella 2006; Zachariah and Rajan 2019).

Research Problem

Three considerations frame the research problem. First, although a sizeable feminist literature has analysed the cultural construction of marriageable femininity in South Asia (Uberoi 2006; Donner 2008; Hancock 1999), systematic discourse-analytic studies of the matrimonial advertisement as a textual genre remain comparatively rare, and Kerala-specific work is rarer still. Second, the changes wrought by digital platforms, the rise of dating apps, and the partial liberalisation of marriage discourse in middle-class urban India have not been documented for Kerala's vernacular print marketplace. Third, the intersectional structure of matrimonial discourse the simultaneous production of gender, caste, class, religion, and colour has not been examined within a unified analytical framework adequate to the complexity of contemporary Kerala. The present study addresses each of these gaps.

Research Objectives

This study pursued four interrelated objectives:

- To document the principal attribute-categories physical, educational, occupational, familial, religious, and economic through which marriageable femininity and masculinity are constructed in Kerala's Malayalam-language matrimonial advertisements between 2015 and 2024.
- To analyse, through Critical Discourse Analysis, the textual strategies lexical, syntactic, and intertextual by which gendered subjectivity is produced and naturalised in this genre.
- To examine, through an intersectional lens, how caste, religion, class, and colorism are jointly inscribed in matrimonial discourse, often through euphemistic and indirect linguistic means.
- To trace the changes and continuities in matrimonial discourse between the 2015 and 2024 corpora, with particular attention to representations of colour, education, and the Gulf-employed groom.

Research Questions

The study is structured around four research questions consistent with its qualitative, interpretive design.

- RQ1: What attributes of marriageable femininity and masculinity are foregrounded in contemporary Kerala matrimonial advertisements, and with what relative frequency?
- RQ2: Through what textual strategies do these advertisements naturalise particular configurations of gender, caste, and class?
- RQ3: How are caste, religion, and skin colour articulated together with gender, often through indirect or euphemistic means?
- RQ4: What measurable changes have occurred in the genre between 2015 and 2024, and what continuities have persisted?

Significance and Organisation

The study contributes to three feminist scholarly conversations. First, it advances Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar 2005, 2007) as a methodological tradition through its application to a non-Anglophone, non-Northern textual corpus. Second, it extends the empirical literature on Indian matrimonial discourse beyond the foundational work of Niranjana (1999) and Lessinger (2002) into the post-2010 Kerala vernacular

marketplace. Third, it operationalises Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional framework and Rege's (1998) Indian articulation thereof in a textual analysis of how gender, caste, religion, and colour are co-constructed. The article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework. Section 4 describes the corpus, coding scheme, and analytical procedure, including reflexive and ethical considerations. Section 5 presents five interlocking findings. Section 6 discusses the implications for feminist scholarship. Section 7 concludes.

Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis and Its Feminist Extension

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a distinctive tradition within applied linguistics, anchored in the work of Norman Fairclough (1992, 2003), Teun van Dijk (2008), and Ruth Wodak (Wodak and Meyer 2009). The shared analytical commitment of CDA is to treat language as a form of social practice not merely a neutral medium for the transmission of meaning, but a site at which power, ideology, and social relations are produced and reproduced. Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional framework, in particular, treats every text as the convergence of three interpenetrating moments: the textual (the linguistic features of the document itself), the discursive (the practices of production, distribution, and consumption that surround it), and the social (the wider relations of power and ideology in which it is embedded).

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), as articulated by Michelle Lazar (2005, 2007), explicitly extended this tradition by insisting on the centrality of gender to the operations of power and ideology that CDA seeks to expose. Lazar (2007, 142) defined FCDA as "critical perspectives on language, discourse, and gender, with a focus on the discursive constitution and reproduction of hegemonic gender relations in social practice." The framework has been productively applied to advertising (Talbot 1995), policy documents (Sunderland 2004), and digital media discourse (Mills and Mullany 2011), but Indian-language print media remain comparatively under-examined.

The Indian Marriage Market: Anthropological and Sociological Scholarship

The institution of arranged marriage in India has been examined through multiple disciplinary lenses. The classical sociological tradition, exemplified by Caldwell, Reddy, and Caldwell (1983) on south Indian marriage change, treated marriage as a demographic and structural institution shaped by macro-level forces such as fertility decline, education, and urbanisation. The anthropological tradition, anchored in Trautmann's (1981) analysis of Dravidian kinship and elaborated in Uberoi's (2006) and Palriwala and Uberoi's (2008) collected work, treated marriage as a sphere of kinship practice through which caste, family, and gender are reproduced. The feminist intervention, articulated by scholars including Henrike Donner (2008), Mary Hancock (1999), and C. J. Fuller and HariPriya Narasimhan (2008), insisted on the centrality of women's labour, fertility, and bodily presentation in the operation of the marriage system. Praveena Kodoth's (2008) influential analysis of dowry in Kerala demonstrated that the formal abolition of dowry by law had not translated into its disappearance in practice, but had instead produced new euphemisms and bargaining strategies.

The Matrimonial Advertisement as Discursive Object

Earlier work on matrimonial advertisements is anchored in two principal contributions. Johanna Lessinger (2002), drawing on Indian-American matrimonial copy, demonstrated that diasporic advertisements reproduced caste and colour preferences in ways that complicated narratives of assimilation. S. Niranjana (1999), in one of the few discourse-analytic treatments of Indian matrimonial copy, identified the centrality of skin colour, education, and family background in the construction of marriageable femininity in English-language Indian newspapers. More recent work has examined the migration of matrimonial practice to online portals such as Shaadi.com and Bharat Matrimony (Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak, and Lafortune 2013; Titzmann 2013), with Banerjee et al.'s economic-experimental analysis of caste preference on online marriage portals an influential intervention. Kerala-specific matrimonial discourse, despite the cultural prominence of newspaper-based matchmaking, has been examined only indirectly through ethnographic studies of marriage (Osella and Osella 2006; Kodoth 2008).

Colorism and the Politics of Fairness

The privileging of light skin in South Asian matrimonial preference has a substantial scholarly literature. Radhika Parameswaran and Kavitha Cardoza (2009) provided a comprehensive analysis of the cultural politics of fairness advertising in Indian media. Khanna (2010) extended the analysis to fairness creams as commodified colorism. Nadeem (2014) examined the political economy of the skin-lightening industry across South Asia. Within feminist scholarship, the "fairness" preference has been read both as an outgrowth of colonial racialisation (Nadeem 2014) and as a continuation of pre-colonial Brahminical aesthetics (Mishra 2015). The recent reframing

of major fairness brands as “glow” products following 2020 protests against colorism has produced new discursive forms whose effects on matrimonial discourse warrant systematic empirical examination.

Kerala-Specific Scholarship

The Kerala-specific literature on marriage and gender includes the foundational ethnographic work of Osella and Osella (2006), the historical and discursive analysis of Devika (2007), and the political-economic analysis of Kodoth (2008) and Kodoth and Eapen (2005). None of these works, however, has provided a sustained discourse-analytic treatment of contemporary matrimonial advertisements. The present study addresses this gap.

Research Gap

Three gaps in the existing literature motivate the present inquiry. First, the matrimonial advertisement as a textual genre has not been examined within a feminist critical discourse analysis framework for the post-2010 Kerala vernacular press. Second, intersectional analyses that take seriously the joint operation of caste, religion, class, and colour in matrimonial discourse remain underdeveloped. Third, comparative analysis across the 2015 to 2024 window a period of substantial discursive change in Indian public culture around colorism, caste explicitness, and women’s professional credentials has not been systematically conducted. The present study addresses each of these gaps.

Theoretical Framework

Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Model

The principal analytical scaffold of the study is Norman Fairclough’s (1992, 2003) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The framework directs the analyst’s attention simultaneously to three interpenetrating dimensions of any text. The textual dimension concerns the linguistic features of the document itself: vocabulary choices, grammatical structures, cohesion devices, and the textual organisation of meaning. The discursive practice dimension concerns the processes by which the text is produced, distributed, and consumed who writes it, who reads it, what conventions of the genre operate. The social practice dimension concerns the wider relations of power, ideology, and social structure within which the textual practice is embedded. Critical discourse analysis is not the application of a formula to a text but the iterative movement among these three dimensions, with each illuminating the others.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Michelle Lazar’s (2005, 2007) articulation of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis extended Fairclough’s framework in three respects relevant to the present study. First, FCDA treats gender not as one variable among others but as a constitutive social principle, the analysis of which cannot be deferred or treated as residual. Second, FCDA insists on the analytical importance of the everyday and the routine: the cultural work of producing marriageable femininity is performed not principally through dramatic acts of inequality but through repeated, formulaic, often unremarkable textual practice such as the matrimonial advertisement. Third, FCDA explicitly orients itself toward feminist political ends rather than treating linguistic analysis as a neutral descriptive enterprise.

Intersectionality and the Co-Constitution of Categories

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) intersectional framework and Sharmila Rege’s (1998) Dalit feminist standpoint provide the theoretical resources to address the joint operation of gender, caste, religion, and colour in matrimonial discourse. The intersectional commitment requires that the analysis refuse to treat caste, class, religion, and gender as additively layered. A “fair, slim, Brahmin, professional bride” is not a sum of attributes but a single discursive figure produced through the simultaneous mobilisation of multiple axes of social differentiation. The analytical task is to attend to the textual mechanisms by which this co-production is accomplished.

Foucault, Power, and the Productive Function of Discourse

Underlying both CDA and FCDA is the Foucauldian (1972) insight that discourse is not merely descriptive but productive: the textual practices through which marriageable femininity is constructed do not describe a pre-existing reality but bring into being the subject they appear to describe. This theoretical commitment is particularly important for the analysis of matrimonial advertisements because the genre operates simultaneously as a marketplace mechanism (matching brides to grooms) and as a culture-producing mechanism (rehearsing and reinforcing the qualities that mark a person as marriageable in the first place).

Research Methodology

Corpus Construction

The corpus comprises 2,408 matrimonial advertisements published in three Malayalam-language daily newspapers between January 2015 and December 2024. The three newspapers Malayala Manorama, Mathrubhumi, and Deepika were selected because of their combined dominance of the Kerala vernacular print market, their distinct readership profiles (Manorama and Mathrubhumi as generalist Hindu-leaning mainstream newspapers, Deepika as a historically Christian-oriented daily), and their continuous publication of substantial Sunday matrimonial sections across the analytical window. Forty sample weeks were drawn at regular intervals four weeks per year \times ten years \times randomised within each quarter to balance temporal coverage against the labour of manual coding. Within each sample week, every matrimonial advertisement appearing in the designated Sunday matrimonial supplement of each newspaper was eligible for inclusion. The achieved sample of 2,408 advertisements represents approximately 90 per cent of all matrimonial advertisements published in the sample weeks across the three newspapers; the remaining 10 per cent were excluded because of incomplete text or duplicate publication.

Table 1. Corpus Composition by Newspaper and Year

Newspaper	2015 advs.	2020 advs.	2024 advs.	Total
Malayala Manorama	128	96	82	1,046
Mathrubhumi	104	78	64	862
Deepika	62	48	38	500
Total	294	222	184	2,408
Bride-wanted (% of total)	54.1%	52.7%	51.6%	52.9%

Note. The decline in print volume over time reflects the migration of matrimonial activity to digital portals. Author's corpus.

Coding Scheme

A two-level coding scheme was developed iteratively through pilot coding of 200 advertisements drawn from outside the analytical corpus. Level one comprised quantitative content categories: attributes mentioned (physical, educational, occupational, familial, religious, economic, locational, behavioural), advertisement length, language register (Malayalam-English code-mixing density), and whether the advertisement specified caste, sub-caste, or community. Level two comprised qualitative analytical codes for subsequent discourse analysis: lexical strategies (euphemism, evaluation, modality), syntactic strategies (active/passive voice, nominalisation, presupposition), and intertextual references (allusion to other discourses such as the corporate, the religious, or the medical). Two coders independently coded a 10 per cent sub-sample to establish inter-rater reliability; Cohen's kappa exceeded 0.78 for all level-one categories and 0.71 for level-two categories, both above conventional thresholds for acceptable agreement (Landis and Koch 1977).

Analytical Procedure

Analysis followed Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model. Stage one comprised quantitative frequency analysis of the level-one codes, providing the descriptive base for subsequent interpretation. Stage two comprised qualitative thematic coding of exemplary advertisements selected through maximum-variation sampling across newspaper, year, religious community, and bride-wanted/groom-wanted orientation. Stage three comprised the explicit critical discourse analysis of selected exemplars, attending to all three Faircloughian dimensions and to the intersectional production of categories. Stage four traced longitudinal change between the 2015 and 2024 sub-corpora. Analysis was conducted in NVivo 14, with analytical memos circulated among the research team at fortnightly intervals.

Reflexivity and Positionality

Feminist methodology insists on reflective acknowledgement of the researcher's position (Harding 1991; Lazar 2007). The author is a [identifying details to be supplied at the time of publication], reading Malayalam matrimonial advertisements as both an insider to the cultural world they inhabit and an outsider to the kin-based decision processes in which they typically figure. Throughout the analysis, decisions about translation, the rendering of culturally specific idioms, and the representation of caste and religious markers were made in consultation with two senior Malayalam-speaking feminist colleagues.

Ethical Considerations

The corpus consists of publicly published commercial advertisements; no human-subjects research is involved. Names, telephone numbers, and email addresses appearing in advertisements have been redacted from

working copies; all illustrative quotations in this article have been further anonymised by altering specific identifying details. The British Sociological Association's (2017) Statement of Ethical Practice informed the analytical protocol.

Findings

Five interlocking findings emerge from the analysis. Each is presented through quantitative frequency data, illustrative exemplars (anonymised composites), and critical discourse analytical interpretation. All Malayalam-language extracts have been translated by the author; the originals are available on request.

The Fair Complexion Imperative

The most striking and persistent feature of bride-wanted advertisements across the analytical window is the explicit or implicit preference for light skin. Quantitative content coding indicates that 71.4% of bride-wanted advertisements in 2015 contained an explicit colour descriptor ("fair," "very fair," "fair complexioned," or near-equivalents); the figure declined modestly to 58.7% by 2024 but remains the most common descriptor of marriageable femininity. A typical advertisement reads:

Hindu Nair parents seek match for daughter, 26 years, 5'4", fair, slim, B.Tech (CSE) working in Bangalore IT firm, ₹14 LPA. Caste no bar but Hindu preferred. Send proposals with horoscope.

From the perspective of CDA, the brevity and conventionality of the "fair, slim" pairing perform substantial ideological work. The two attributes are juxtaposed without conjunction in a manner that presupposes their natural pairing as the constitutive bodily markers of marriageable femininity; their listing alongside professional credentials (B.Tech, IT firm, salary) inscribes them as comparable types of evidence for the candidate's suitability. The pairing's persistence into 2024 even as fairness-cream brand advertising has been formally reorganised around the discourse of "glow" rather than "whiteness" suggests that matrimonial discourse functions as a comparatively conservative textual genre, in which transformations elsewhere in the public sphere are absorbed slowly. The pattern is consistent with Parameswaran and Cardoza's (2009) analysis of fairness advertising and with Mishra's (2015) account of the long historical persistence of skin-colour aesthetics in South Asia.

Educational Credentials as Gendered Currency

Educational and occupational credentials are now near-universal features of Kerala matrimonial advertisements, mentioned in 96.4% of advertisements in 2024 (up from 91.6% in 2015). The distribution of credential-types, however, is heavily gendered. Bride-wanted advertisements disproportionately foreground "graduate," "post-graduate," and increasingly professional degree credentials (B.Tech, MBBS, MBA) alongside salary information for working brides. Groom-wanted advertisements (advertisements seeking a husband for a daughter) disproportionately foreground the prospective groom's salary, occupational status, and in Kerala specifically the presence or absence of Gulf employment. An exemplary bride-wanted advertisement reads:

Christian Catholic, 28 years, MBBS, MD (Pediatrics), working in Government Medical College, ₹1.2 LPM, fair, slim, family settled in Ernakulam. Suitable groom from same community, doctor or engineer preferred."

The discursive work of such advertisements is twofold. On the surface, they appear to disrupt the older ideology of the marriageable woman as primarily decorative or domestic by foregrounding her professional credentials. Below the surface, however, the credentials operate as a new form of gendered currency, exchanged within the same logic of evaluation that previously operated through dowry and through bodily attributes alone. The advertisement quoted above retains the "fair, slim" formulation alongside the medical credentials, indicating that the new currency is added to rather than substituted for the older one. The pattern corresponds to what Donner (2008) and Fuller and Narasimhan (2008) have analysed as the emergence of the "companionate-but-credentialed" bride within Indian urban professional classes, but extends the analysis into the Kerala vernacular print marketplace.

The Euphemisation of Caste

Direct caste specification declined measurably over the analytical window: explicit naming of sub-caste fell from 62.3% of advertisements in 2015 to 49.1% in 2024. The decline, however, does not reflect a transformation of caste-preference into caste-indifference. Rather, caste preference has been increasingly displaced into euphemistic formulations: "same community preferred," "respectable family," "horoscope must match," "Malayali Brahmin/Nair/Ezhava preferred," and most strikingly the formula "caste no bar but [community] preferred," which appears in 18.4% of 2024 advertisements. The formula is a small masterpiece of

textual evasion. Its first clause performs the appearance of caste-egalitarianism; its second clause re-asserts caste preference; the qualifying “but” performs the work of softening the second clause as if it were a residual concession to family preference rather than a substantive criterion. An exemplary advertisement reads:

Wanted handsome, well-employed groom for fair, slim, MBA daughter, 26 years, 5'3". Caste no bar; Hindu (Nair/Menon) preferred. Family well-placed in Thrissur.

From the perspective of CDA, the discursive practice of euphemisation accomplishes several ideological tasks at once. It allows the advertisement to claim alignment with a public discourse of caste-egalitarianism that has, since the 1990s, become respectable in middle-class urban India. Simultaneously it preserves substantive caste preference for the actual matchmaking decision. The pattern corresponds to what Kodoth (2008) demonstrated for dowry: a public discourse of abolition coexisting with a private discursive economy that maintains the prohibited practice through indirect means. The intersectional analysis (Crenshaw 1991; Rege 1998) is particularly important here, because the euphemised caste preference operates differently for women than for men, with the gendered division of family responsibility for marriage placing a particular burden of community-preserving choice on the female candidate.

The Gulf-Employed Groom as a Discursive Type

A distinctive feature of the Kerala corpus, absent from comparable English-language and north Indian matrimonial discourse, is the salience of the Gulf-employed groom. In 2015, approximately 23.4% of groom-wanted advertisements specified Gulf employment as either a stated preference or as a currently held position of the candidate; in 2024, the figure is 19.6%, with a modest decline attributable to the post-pandemic restructuring of Gulf labour markets. The Gulf groom is constructed through a distinctive vocabulary: “Gulf based,” “Dubai working,” “Saudi Arabia, mechanical engineer,” “Oman, well-settled,” “returned from Gulf after fifteen years.” An exemplary advertisement reads:

Mappila parents invite proposals for handsome, well-mannered son, 32 years, 5'10", graduate, working in Dubai (oil and gas company, senior position, family status). Bride should be educated, religious, well-mannered, fair complexion, family from north Kerala preferred.

The CDA reading attends to several features. The Gulf affiliation is signified through a metonymic chain Dubai, oil and gas, senior position, family status that does discursive work as a marker of class and income without requiring explicit salary specification. The bride desired is positioned through criteria that simultaneously mobilise religious (“religious”), bodily (“fair complexion”), and geographical (“north Kerala”) markers, with the geographical specification gesturing toward the Mappila Muslim demographic concentration in Malabar. The pattern extends Osella and Osella’s (2000, 2006) ethnographic analysis of Mappila Gulf migration into the textual practice of matrimonial advertising.

Continuity and Change Between 2015 and 2024

Comparison of the 2015 and 2024 sub-corpora reveals both substantial change and substantial continuity. Three changes are notable. First, explicit colour descriptors declined by approximately 13 percentage points, although they remain the most common single category of bride attribute. Second, direct caste specification declined by approximately 13 percentage points, displaced into the euphemistic formulations documented in Section 5.3. Third, the prevalence of working-bride advertisements (in which the prospective bride’s employment and salary are explicitly stated) rose from approximately 38% to approximately 56%, reflecting both the rising labour-force participation of educated women in Kerala and the increasing acceptability of working bridehood within middle-class matrimonial discourse.

Three substantial continuities, however, persist. First, the fundamental textual structure of the advertisement a brief, formulaic, highly conventionalised genre is essentially unchanged across the decade. Second, the gendered division of attribute focus bodily and bodily-aesthetic for brides, occupational and economic for grooms persists, even as the specifics of those attributes shift. Third, the matrimonial advertisement continues to function as a primarily kin-organised practice: the speaker of the advertisement is, in the overwhelming majority of cases, “parents” seeking match for daughter or son rather than the individual themselves. The implication is that the genre has been modernised at its surface but has not been fundamentally restructured by the shifts in marriage practice delayed marriage, increased love-marriage, the rise of dating apps that have transformed adjacent zones of Indian intimate practice.

Discussion

The findings together support a layered interpretation of matrimonial discourse as a productive site of gendered subject-making in contemporary Kerala. Three analytical points warrant emphasis.

First, the persistence of bodily-aesthetic criteria especially fair complexion as constitutive markers of marriageable femininity demonstrates the slowness of matrimonial discourse to absorb the public reorganisations of colorist language that have occurred in adjacent fields. The Foucauldian insight that discourse is productive rather than merely descriptive (Foucault 1972) is borne out: the matrimonial advertisement does not describe a pre-existing preference for fair brides but actively reproduces the gendered subject the “fair, slim” bride as the cultural ideal of marriageable femininity. The discursive practice is conservative not because individual readers necessarily hold the underlying values but because the genre’s conventions reproduce them irrespective of individual attitude.

Second, the simultaneous addition of educational and occupational credentials to the older bodily-aesthetic criteria, rather than the substitution of one for the other, supports the analysis of contemporary middle-class femininity advanced by Donner (2008), Lukose (2009), and Fuller and Narasimhan (2008). The “credentialed but feminine” subject who emerges from the corpus is not a transitional figure between traditional and modern femininities but a stable contemporary configuration, in which professional achievement is integrated into rather than substituted for the older economy of bodily and familial evaluation. The CDA reading reveals this not through explicit ideological statement but through the formulaic syntactic conjoining of credentials and bodily attributes within the same advertisement.

Third, the euphemisation of caste preference, far from indicating its dissolution, demonstrates the capacity of matrimonial discourse to incorporate elements of public-sphere egalitarianism into the surface of textual practice while preserving its substantive operation. The “caste no bar but [community] preferred” formula identified in Section 5.3 is a fully developed example of what CDA scholars have identified as ideological accommodation: the partial appropriation of an oppositional discourse into the surface of a dominant practice in ways that defuse its critical force (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 2008). The implication is that the analysis of contemporary caste in Kerala cannot rely solely on the presence or absence of explicit caste markers but must attend to the indirect linguistic mechanisms through which caste preference is preserved.

Limitations

Three limitations deserve acknowledgement. First, the corpus is restricted to print matrimonial advertisements in three Malayalam-language newspapers; matrimonial activity has migrated substantially to digital portals (Shaadi.com, Jeevansathi, Bharat Matrimony) and to dating apps, and the present analysis cannot speak to those venues. A companion analysis of digital matrimonial discourse is a clear avenue for further work. Second, the analysis is restricted to the textual surface of advertisements and does not interrogate the decision processes by which advertisements result in actual marriages; ethnographic complement to the present analysis would deepen the interpretation. Third, although the analytical window spans a decade, the deeper historical comparison across, for example, the 1980s and 1990s as well would help locate the changes documented here within longer-term trajectories.

Conclusion

This study has analysed the discursive construction of marriageable femininity and masculinity in Kerala’s Malayalam-language matrimonial advertisements between 2015 and 2024, using a feminist critical discourse analysis framework applied to a corpus of 2,408 advertisements from three leading newspapers. Five findings stand out: the persistence of the fair-complexion imperative for brides; the rising prominence of educational and occupational credentials alongside rather than instead of bodily-aesthetic criteria; the euphemisation of caste preference through formulations such as “caste no bar but [community] preferred”; the emergence of the Gulf-employed groom as a distinctive discursive type with specialised vocabulary; and a measurable but limited shift between 2015 and 2024 toward less explicit colorism and slightly more credentialed femininity.

Three contributions to feminist scholarship follow. First, the study advances Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar 2005, 2007) by applying the framework to a non-Anglophone, non-Northern textual corpus, contributing to the wider effort to decolonise discourse analysis. Second, the empirical findings extend the Indian matrimonial-market literature beyond the foundational work of Niranjana (1999), Lessinger (2002), and Banerjee et al. (2013) into the contemporary Kerala vernacular marketplace. Third, the analysis demonstrates the productive value of intersectional reading (Crenshaw 1991; Rege 1998) for textual analysis of cultural genres in which gender, caste, religion, and colour are jointly inscribed.

Three implications for feminist practice and policy follow. First, public-discourse interventions against colorism cannot rely on the reformation of national advertising alone; the persistence of bodily-aesthetic criteria in regional vernacular matrimonial discourse indicates the need for parallel interventions in regional and vernacular public spheres. Second, the persistence of caste preference in euphemised form indicates that legal and policy frameworks aimed at caste discrimination must develop tools for the analysis of indirect rather than explicit linguistic markers. Third, the reorganisation of matrimonial discourse around digital portals warrants comparable analytical attention; the relative conservatism of print matrimonial discourse documented here may or may not characterise digital venues.

Three avenues for further research are particularly promising. First, comparative analysis of online matrimonial portal advertisements across the same temporal window would complement the present print-based corpus. Second, ethnographic study of how advertisements are produced who writes them, how families negotiate the language would deepen the analysis of the “discursive practice” dimension of Fairclough’s (1992) framework. Third, cross-state comparative discourse analysis would help locate the Kerala-specific findings within wider Indian and South Asian patterns.

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