



## **Capitalizing Mail-Order Brides: American Hegemony and a Return to Pre-Feminism**

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### ***Abstract***

Contrary to popular belief, mail-order marriage is not left behind in history. With technological advancement, globalism, and capitalism, mail-order relationships in the modern world have become a capitalist venture through the form of a global marriage market with Internet websites (Starr & Adams, 2016, pp. 968-969). Currently, the common practice operates internationally in between different nations and ethnicities (Merriman, 2012, p. 87). However, the mail-order bride market is distinct from the regular intercultural dating business: a clear power structure exists between the grooms (capitalist along with mail-order marriage companies) and the brides (commodities). This paper examines how this dating market serves Western men (I will be using this term interchangeably with American men) to reinforce traditional Western masculine hegemony and ethnic dominance in a global setting (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 972).

### ***Introduction***

Mail-order marriages are cross-cultural relationships facilitated by international matchmaking websites, usually positioning women from developing (or third-world) countries as brides and men from developed countries as grooms (Amy, 1997, p. 368). It is undeniable that some of these relationships are entirely rooted in the hope to meet a lifelong partner with a different cultural and ethnic background; however, the popular viewpoint proposes that mail-order marriages are a form of an oppressive arranged marriage between a poor, desperate, and uneducated woman who sells herself for an immigration visa with an older man rejected by the local females who has no other way of dating a woman unless he pays for it (Robinson, 1996, p. 56). In this paper, I study how this representation of the relationship culture manifests in reality, particularly addressing American (or Western) men. The term capitalist in the paper mainly refers

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to mail-order marriage companies but also Western male customers. I hypothesize that sexism and racism are innately embedded in the practice of mail-order marriages in the modern era. I also demonstrate the potential impacts of this international practice on the connection between people from developing nations and developed nations, even those who do not partake in it.

### ***Mail-Order Heroes: History of the Practice***

Before presenting the contemporary issues and viewpoints of mail-order marriages, I would like to state that the historical practice was distinct from the modern one in its nature (Zug, 2012, pp. 85-86). In the early 1600s, Britain and France actively searched for immigrants to settle down in America after their colonial settlement (Zug, 2012, p. 86). However, the colonies' populations in its beginning were almost entirely males without a family since colonists did not intend to stay for longer and immigrants lacked in numbers (Zug, 2012, p. 87). Not many women from the colonies wanted to immigrate and start a family in the unpromising, struggling land in this early stage of America, so the colonists would bring mail-order brides to stabilize the country's population (Zug, 2012, pp. 87-88).

Jamestown colony in Virginia made the first attempt with a careful approach to protect these women from any possibility of forced immigration (Zug, 2012, pp. 87-88). The Virginia Company successfully brought 140 brides willing to settle in America when the colonies failed to find enough female immigrants and colonists who could help male settlers stay, lowering the risk of reverse immigration back to England (Zug, 2012, pp. 88-90). Another threat the government wanted to prevent by this measure was the intermarriage between native women and the colonists, as native women were viewed to pose a significant security threat to the nations (Zug, 2012, pp. 89-90). Consequently, the first American mail order brides were viewed as heroes essential to the success and survival of the American colonies (Zug, 2012, p. 89). Thus, in the past, the high demand for the immigration of marriageable women empowered mail-order brides, and they "were both rewarded and respected for doing so" (Zug, 2012, pp. 40-41).

### ***Modern Mail-Order Marriages Statistics***

Contemporary societies have fundamentally capitalized on this international matchmaking method. In an increasingly globalized and multicultural world, America's government no longer needs migrating women to sustain its country's population. However, the desire to find a match overseas has grown, and mail-order bride services are gaining immense popularity (Date4u, 2021). Traffic to their websites has tripled for the last ten years, and they currently have "over 2 million visits a month, while the number of mail order bride marriages only in the US has reached around 10,000 a year," making American men the most active grooms amongst all (Date4u, 2021). The marketplace advertises that these marriages have twice lower divorce statistics than the general American marriages (Date4u, 2021), stating that "only 1/5 of all married couples decide to split up" (Ronfless, 2019). American grooms are often between the ages of 30 and 60 and are "anywhere from 20 to 50 years older than the bride[s]," who are usually in their 20s and are from Asian and

Eastern European countries (Date4u, 2021; Branagan, 2019). The agencies claim to make "as much as \$6,000–\$10,000 per client," making them "an enormous profit while operating with minimal costs" considering the increasing number of mail-order bride demands (Branagan, 2019).

### *American Dominance in Global Society*

The modern mail-order marriage market thrives on certain conditions. Their profits depend on how successfully they advertise and attract users, like any other modern capitalist. Common reasoning they employ to advertise the need of a foreign wife through mail-order marriage services often follows: our exotic beauties (better than your local women in home-making, loyalty, and bed) suffer in poor countries with outdated customs and sexist men who often mistreat them, so they desire a better life with a more romantic and reliable fiancé in a developed country in hopes to "provide their children with a better future than they have" (SFWeekly, 2021). This type of narration cultivates multiple concerns from critics. This section articulates how the mail-order marriage practice illustrates global economic disparities, disunification, and American hegemony internationally.

First, the narrative illustrates the foreign women as victims that need American men's savings. This fabrication resembles the Western colonists' story that believed they had to save the Native peoples of their areas by teaching Western values that were supposedly superior and more sophisticated than those of the Natives. The paternalistic and colonialistic ways of viewing the mail-order marriage with a foreign woman as an act of rescuing the bride from foreign men create the division between foreign women and foreign men.

Second, it serves as economic and moral generalization and division between less developed and industrialized nations. By setting America as a promising land filled with faithful and well-off men who can provide for their wives and criticizing foreign countries and their men as the opposite, it "operate[s] not only to juxtapose the foreign man against the Western man but also to posit the Western man as the ideal marital partner on the global stage" (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 970). Here, we see the division between the countries, foreign men and Western men, and again, foreign women and foreign men.

Third, false representation and generalization of women from both abroad and America leads to foreign women being the feminine ideal while viewing Western women as feminine deviance by criticizing American feminism (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 971). In this way, American men can "justify the international search for a marital partner by foreign women," whose stereotype is to be compliant and traditional with gender norms and roles (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 970). Thus, the compatibility of American men and foreign women in their logic is, in fact, only possible "through the accompanying dismissal of alternative romantic opportunities" (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 971). This supports the idea of the perfect match between American men and foreign women; however, the elimination of other opportunities must accompany racism and sexism toward foreign men and western women (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 971). As a result, it separates Western men and Western women and divides even foreign women and Western women.

With these narrations of dismissal of one another, Third World poverty, and upward mobility ('marrying up' into a higher status category), the mail-order bride market of global capit-

alism becomes the "symbolic of global economic inequality" and thus rearticulates the "U.S. patriarchal and imperial desires to 'rescue' women from 'Third World' poverty and men" (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 961; So, 2006, p. 395). In short, the mail-order marriage system manifests Western masculine hegemony (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 955).

### *Nostalgia for Pre-American Feminism*

Elaborating on the third portion of the above list, the marketing narrative of Western men's ideal masculinity and Western females' feminine deviation must include, then, the explanation of why American men should look for a partner outside of their region (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 971). In other words, they must explain why the American man cannot find a match in America and how foreign women are better than their local American women. The primary consumer population consists of men who are frequently assumed not to be popular or sought by in their local romantic market, so the mail-order bride agencies often highlight why their brides will yearn to be with them. They also encourage the American men "to view their lack of success in the American dating and marriage market as the fault of American women" and see themselves as valuable goods in this industry (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 967). This capitalist tactic generally blames American "feminism, sexual revolution, and globalization" to explain why Western women have become career-minded, unappreciative, and challenging (Starr & Adams, 2016, pp. 954, 967). In their study, Starr and Adams discover that some mail-order marriage websites imply that the grooms not only make a personal romantic choice through them but also a political statement: "Through his personal actions, a rebellion against modern gender arrangements is waged" (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 968).

The tactic also lists their brides' traditional family values and feministic characteristics that differ from American women to highlight their supremacy in not adopting the contemporary American feminist ideologies (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 954). At the same time, they promote the mail-order brides on their websites by their exoticness as they highlight the women's traditional domestic values that are familiar to American men: the patriarchal family structures and natural femininity such as "mother instinct" (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 954). Following this rhetoric, within the family power structure of a mail-order marriage, the bride is evaluated by "her ability to be incorporated into Western ideologies of masculine and feminine family roles" while still being different and exotic from everyday experiences like the local American women (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 954). As So's understanding of critic Roland Tolentino's argument puts, "fantasies of [mail-order brides] connect soundly with a nostalgia for the nuclear family in a rhetoric that positions the Third World woman in a domestic sphere that First World women have presumably abandoned" (as cited in So, 2006, p. 405; Tolentino, 1996, p. 70). Consequently, Starr and Adams declare that the consumers of the mail-order marriage market are looking back to the pre-feminist past of America: "The customer is looking back. His ultimate romantic goal, or what turns him on, is to reproduce the traditional American family through the implantation of a foreign woman" (2016, p. 17).

### *The Commodification of Women: Sexualization of Race*

Racialized women are subject to sexist discrimination and sexual objectification as women, but their races further take the negative experiences to the next level: racial homogenization and depersonalization (Zheng, 2016, p. 407). These are often consequences of the broad generalization of racial (and often sexual) stereotypes and fetishes in disguise of sexual preferences, leading a racialized woman to feel as though she is not a person but a mere object (Zheng, 2016, p. 407). The tendency to romanticize elements or a person foreign to oneself is called exoticization, and exotification is when exoticization is applied to a group of people (Ziehl, 2020). This makes women of colour more vulnerable to objectification, glamorization, and fetishization (Ziehl, 2020).

Mail-order marriage market is not an exception to sexualizing the race. Even the term "mail-order" illustrates the image of the male consumer selecting a commodity at a store, "which is necessarily passive in the acquisition" (Robinson, 1996, p. 54). Their advertisement constantly points out the exoticness and sexual superiority of the foreign brides. As a mail-order bride ad on a newspaper reports, women from Thailand are "a rare breed of fragile and tender. [They] seem especially appealing to men tired of feministic and independent western women. Furthermore, they have a number of outstanding benefits too:

- Best homemakers;
- Gracious and petite look;
- Non-indicative intimacy in and out of the bedroom;
- Confidence and femininity;
- Politeness and sharp maternal instinct;
- Hardworking nature" (Sponsor, 2021).

After all, as Starr and Adams claim, "foreign women's superiority in performing reproductive labor in the form of sex is a critical dimension of the domestic exotic" (2016, p. 965). However, this "supposed sexual superiority of [foreign] women ultimately renders them inferior as full human beings; they are more completely reduced to having value only as sexual or domestic objects" (Zheng, 2016, pp. 411-412).

This process of racial hyper-sexualization forms not only the potential grooms' titillating view of the women but also the general public's opinion on foreign women and mail-order marriages. For example, the combative talk-show host Geraldo Rivera in 1989, commented on the economic and sexual exploitation that could occur between couples in mail-order marriages: "Are these [mail-order brides] jumping on the long-distance marital bandwagon just to get a passport to the promised land? Or are the American men just marrying these Asian women to get a resident geisha, a household appliance with sex organs, as some critics charge" (So, 2006, p. 402)? The comparison of Asian women as a household appliance with sex organs indeed portrays the objectification of their domestic and sexual labour in her cross-cultural marriage.

In another case, an Australian woman expressed her anger at Australian men married to Filipino mail-order brides in 1979: "I strongly resent the statement by the [Australian] males, that Australian women had something to learn from the subservient Filipino women. In my opinion these lazy bastards . . . are not prepared to spend any energy making an Australian marriage work . . . and so import a meek, obedient slave to be their wife" (Robinson, 1996, p. 57). This quote reaffirms

the earlier issue of the division between Western women and developing nations' women; the western men's claim of the supposed superiority of Asian women over their local Australian women impacted the privileged female to criticize both the men and the women participating in mail-order marriages. The angry woman insists on her belief that depicts the Filipino wife as overly submissive and compliant to men probably due to the "ignorant, unprogressive, and backward" culture the foreign woman comes from. In this narrative, the progressive, educated, and autonomous Australian women have nothing to learn from the inferior racialized women.

In other words, the distorted, one-sided representation of foreign women is bolstered by the capitalist (mail-order marriage companies and Western male customers) narratives of women from developed nations and following public stigma around these arranged interracial relationships. Subsequently, famous perceptions such as "Sell a Visa, Buy A Girl" further commodify and disempower mail-order brides who are frequently assumed to be desperate "victims of force, kidnap, and prostitution" with no personal agency (Robinson, 1996, p. 55; Zug, 2012, p. 124). The media often focuses on the characteristics of men and women entering the mail-order bride business to reinforce the popular assumption that their marriage is not based on genuine romantic love (Robinson, 1996, p. 56). The conception of the practice as meeting a romantic love or marriage partner illegitimately and untraditionally arises from the following common characteristics and perception of mail-order marriages (Robinson, 1996, p. 56):

- A company arranges and profits from the relationship.
- The man is usually significantly older and less attractive than the woman, and they must pay to marry her (Robinson, 1996, p. 56).
- The woman is financially opportunistic (economic hypergamy) and sexually manipulating in a way that she sells her body in a loveless marriage; they are nothing more than prostitutes or sex slaves to some (Robinson, 1996, p. 56).

### *The Paradox of Domestic Exotic*

It is not uncommon to see the companies selling mail-order brides' sexuality and body figures to attract buyers. In fact, foreign women on most major mail-order bride websites are required or encouraged to write down their body sizes and measurements on their profiles and to upload "professionally taken photographs that feature a range of outfits and highlight the various angles of their bodies" (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 967). One should ask, then, "but aren't they supposed to present themselves as domestic and sexually passive to be the opposite of independent American women?" Indeed, this is where we see the hypocrisy of the foreign women having to be sensual and passionate in bed but also modest and nurturing for Western men to desire them (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 966). Merriman acknowledges this self-contradictory notion that mail-order brides are "to maximize their sexuality to potential consumers but not to present themselves as economically desperate, uneducated, or 'Godless'" (Merriman, 2012, p. 87). Therefore, they are to balance their representation "between promiscuous and monogamous," reaffirming the American men's ultimate desire: feminine subservience (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 966).

The claim that American men and foreign women have inherent compatibility with similar conventional values is also a paradox (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 971). Most mail-order marriage

advertisements only articulate the brides' urge to escape from their impoverished countries and local men, which is usually an inaccurate and exaggerated depiction of the women's motives and their home countries (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 970). Driven by western men's fears of eroding masculinity and head status in the traditional U.S. nuclear family in modern society (So, 2006, p. 414), the mail-order marriage system produces a power structure where only the consumer (American men)'s needs are addressed (Starr & Adams, 2016, pp. 968-969). The consumer-based business models of international dating agencies shift the attention away from foreign women's authentic desires and characteristics that deviate from consumers' demands. Even if a mail-order bride has pre-feminist conservative beliefs and puts her man and children before herself like the typical stereotypes the market advertises, her customs, languages, and characters unique to her culture and herself are something Western men almost always have no interest in learning and appreciating. The global capitalism practice of mail-order marriage ensures that women from developing countries' identities are reduced and limited to one homogenous exotic, sensual being with immense dedication to her future American husband and family (So, 2006, p. 406). They are only considered worthwhile if they can be successfully "recontextualized into, or identifiable within, Western ideologies" (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 971). If they have to be assimilated into their husbands' versions of American values and practices to have a successful married life, the inherent compatibility between western men and foreign women does not exist.

### *Contemporary Issues for Grooms*

One of the concerns surrounding mail-order marriage is the potential of the bride using the custom as an easy immigration path, "a ticket to a green card" (Elson, 1997, p. 368). As many men look for a lifelong romantic partner and companionship by paying the facilitating company and a woman to bring her to their more developed countries, there is always a possibility that the bride may only want immigration or economic gains, not love (Elson, 1997, p. 368). The common fear is that mail-order brides would divorce their husbands once they secure permanent citizenship, using "their marriages only as a means through which they can then sponsor the rest of their families for immigration status" (Elson, 1997, p. 368). Elson adds that a study revealed a several Filipino mail-order brides who married Australian men reported that they "expected their marriages to Australian men would 'enable them to support their families in the Philippines or to sponsor them for immigration'" (as cited in Elson, 1997, p. 369). Immigration Departments of various nations have created laws and measures in place: the president of the Philippines outlawed mail-order marriages to prevent their female populations from immigrating to other countries and marrying foreign men in 1990, but the law was unsuccessful (Elson, 1997, p. 368). The United States has changed its immigration laws to combat the possibility of marriage and immigration fraud through mail-order bride industry (Elson, 1997, p. 368). Elson contends that "immigration fraud is a factor that must be considered as nations develop policies and strategies designed to address the blossoming mail-order bride industry" (1997, p. 374).

### *Contemporary Issues for Brides*

Mail-order brides who want to start a new life through immigration and marriage can face several issues. First, this practice has been linked to the international trafficking of women (Branagan, 2019). The Anti-Trafficking International (ATI) website states that "human trafficking is the act of compelling a person to engage in sexual acts or forced labor" (ATI, 2021). The International Trafficking of women, explained by Branagan on the ATI website, is "any situation where females cannot change the immediate conditions of their existence, regardless of how they got into those conditions" (2019). In their paper, AS, Yuliastini, and Setiawati link the mail-order bride system to this criminal trafficking: when a bride who forcefully enters into the arranged marriage ends up in domestic or sexual slavery or exploitative conditions, she is a victim of modern human trafficking (2020, p. 72).

With almost 3,000 matchmaking marriage agencies identified, mail-order marriage brokers can openly act as human traffickers by offering women marriage with men from developed nations (Branagan, 2019). The unequal distribution of power in mail-order marriage takes a visible form as soon as the bride arrives in the industrialized country. Under the America's Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendment enacted in 1986, she gets a conditional resident status for two years after "the husband applies for a spousal or fiancée" (Branagan, 2019). The marriage must happen within three months of the bride's arrival, and the couple must jointly apply for the bride's permanent resident status before her conditional resident status expires (Branagan, 2019). Until her residential status becomes permanent, she can be deported anytime (Branagan, 2019). Her powerlessness and dependence on her husband in the foreign country are what make mail-order brides inherently vulnerable to sexual exploitation and domestic violence (Branagan, 2019). Immigrants, including mail-order brides, are prone to experiencing "cultural and linguistic isolation, lack of a social network, economic dependence, and of course fear of deportation" (Branagan, 2019). If she wants to continue living in America, she must stay with her husband for at least two years, no matter what abuse happens to her (Branagan, 2019).

Law enforcement faces obstacles such as "the lack of mechanisms and coordination" when handling modern human trafficking cases that are often internationally organized crimes across national borders (AS et al., 2020, p. 78). There is also a lack of reports and statistics for mail-order brides who fall into a victim of abuse (Branagan, 2019). However, Tahirih Justice Center's survey in 2007 of almost 200 American legal-aid groups discovered that half of the groups had handled mail-order brides' complaints, and the news reported at least three murder cases of mail-order married couples (Branagan, 2019). In 2005, Congress passed the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act, which required international marriage agencies to obtain "the potential bride's written consent to release her personal contact information to the [male] client" and "background information on the American client" that included the national or state sex offender registry's search (Branagan, 2019). This law would help brides know their potential grooms' criminal history and retain "a copy of the United States Homeland Security pamphlet on domestic violence" for education and resource purposes (Branagan, 2019). The bride can refuse to communicate with the male after receiving his background information and criminal history (Branagan, 2019).

Reinhardt tells a story of a young Asian mail-order bride who became a victim of domestic abuse in America (as cited in Perez, 2003, p. 226):

[w]hen she came here, she found out that the man had married her for low-cost domestic help. She was kept in the basement. When it got too warm, she was moved to the garage. A neighbour saw her living in the garage and contacted [the authorities] . . . . She left him . . . [but] he tracked her down. Now she's back with him. She was going to file for divorce. He doesn't allow her to pick up the phone . . . . It appears that [she] is trapped again. Even if she does succeed in divorcing him . . . her legal status may still be very insecure. He had promised her a whole lot of things, including legal residency (as cited in Perez, 2003, p. 226).

### ***Conclusion***

With all the discussions above, I conclude that my hypothesis is right. Racism and sexism are indeed embedded in the practice of the mail-order marriage industry, and it continues to thrive off by actively reinforcing America's global dominance while creating and reaffirming disparities between developing and developed nations. Perhaps radically, increasing American male users of the mail-order bride website are reasserting their rightful place "as heads of the U.S. nuclear family and larger global community," even without knowing (So, 2006, p. 414; Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 969). The central fuel to the industry is western males' fear and hatred toward American feminism and sexual revolution that elevated western females' status in their societies, which does not align with the traditional American men's family values and gender arrangements (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 969). Through the practice of bringing a foreign woman and dressing her as the perfect, feminine ideal wife of the pre-feminism era's American nuclear family, American men and the mail-order marriage system together validate and reconstruct Western masculine hegemony globally (Starr & Adams, 2016, pp. 967-968). Moreover, their global desirability from often racialized women in developing countries enacts and manifests America's ethnic and economic dominance on the international stage (Starr & Adams, 2016, pp. 967-968).

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