



Forced Marriage in Islamic Countries: A Study of Zana Muhsen's Memoir *Sold*

Rasha Osman Abdel Haliem

Higher Technological Institute, Egypt

rasha.abdelhaleem@hti.edu.eg

Abstract

This paper delves into the pervasive issue of forced marriage in Islamic countries, examining the personal narrative of Zana Muhsen as presented in her memoir, *Sold*. By analyzing Muhsen's experiences of child marriage and subsequent sexual exploitation, the paper aims to shed light on the complex interplay of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors that contribute to this harmful practice. The paper begins by contextualizing forced marriage within the broader framework of gender inequality and human rights violations in Islamic societies. It explores the cultural norms and religious interpretations that often justify or normalize this practice, highlighting the devastating consequences for victims, including physical and psychological trauma, limited educational opportunities, and restricted economic prospects. The paper examines Muhsen's personal journey, tracing her experiences from childhood betrothal to her eventual escape from sexual slavery. The memoir documents a practice that continues till today and shows how literature can play a role in raising awareness and enhancing women rights. By analyzing Muhsen's narrative, the paper seeks to understand the psychological impact of forced marriage on victims, as well as the strategies they employ to resist and overcome their circumstances. Ultimately, this paper argues that addressing the issue of forced marriage requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses legal reforms, educational initiatives, and community-based interventions. By shedding light on the plight of victims and advocating for systemic change, progress can be made toward eradicating forced marriage and promoting gender equality in Islamic countries.

Keywords: Forced marriage, child marriage, arranged marriage, feminism, activism, trauma, memoir, ghost writing.

الزواج القسري في البلدان الإسلامية: دراسة لمذكرات زينة محسن "مباعة"

رشا عثمان عبد الحليم

المعهد التكنولوجي العالي، مصر

rasha.abdelhaleem@hti.edu.eg

ملخص

يستقصي هذا البحث قضية الزواج القسري المتفشية في البلدان الإسلامية، وذلك عبر دراسة السرد الذاتي لزينة محسن، كما ورد في مذكراتها المعنونة "مباعة". ويهدف البحث من خلال تحليل تجارب محسن في زواج الأطفال والاستغلال الجنسي اللاحق، إلى إلقاء الضوء على التفاعل المعقد للعوامل الثقافية والدينية والاجتماعية والاقتصادية التي تسهم في ترسيخ هذه الممارسة الضارة. يستهل البحث بتأطير الزواج القسري ضمن السياق الأوسع لعدم المساواة بين الجنسين وانتهاكات حقوق الإنسان في المجتمعات الإسلامية. ويستكشف الأعراف الثقافية والتفسيرات الدينية التي غالباً ما تسوغ أو تطبع هذه الممارسة، مبرزاً العواقب الوخيمة التي تلحق بالضحايا، بما في ذلك الصدمات الجسدية والنفسية، والفرص التعليمية المحدودة، والأفاق الاقتصادية المقيدة. يتناول البحث مسار رحلة محسن الشخصية، متتبعاً تجاربها منذ البيع و الزواج القسري وصولاً إلى فرارها النهائي من العبودية الجنسية. وتوثق المذكرات ممارسة لا تزال مستمرة حتى يومنا هذا، وتوضح الدور الذي يمكن أن يقوم به الأدب في رفع مستوى الوعي وتعزيز حقوق المرأة. ويسعى البحث من خلال تحليل سرد محسن، إلى استيعاب الأثر النفسي للزواج القسري على الضحايا، فضلاً عن الاستراتيجيات التي يعمدونها لمقاومة ظروفهم والتغلب عليها. يخلص البحث إلى أن معالجة قضية الزواج القسري تتطلب نهج متعدد الأوجه تشمل الإصلاحات القانونية، والمبادرات التعليمية، والتدخلات المجتمعية. ومن خلال تسليط الضوء على معاناة الضحايا والدعوة إلى تغيير منهجي، يمكن تحقيق تقدم نحو القضاء على الزواج القسري وتعزيز المساواة بين الجنسين في البلدان الإسلامية.

كلمات مفتاحية: الزواج القسري، الزواج مبكر، الزواج تقليدي، الحركة النسائية، نضال، صدمة نفسية، مذكرات، كتابة سيرة ذاتية للغير.

Introduction

Forced marriage continues to be a pressing global concern, particularly in recent decades. Defined as a union where one partner is coerced into marriage against their will, often due to familial, societal, or cultural pressures, this practice persists in various forms worldwide. Forced marriage often goes unreported or underrepresented, as many cases occur in marginalized communities where victims lack the resources or support to seek help. Zana Muhsen's memoir *Sold* (2011) poignantly illustrates how young girls, sometimes as young as eight years old, are subjected to forced marriages, their consent disregarded. In extreme cases, these victims resort to desperate measures, including self-harm or even suicide, to escape their forced unions. This disturbing trend is not limited to girls; young boys, too, can be compelled into unwanted marriages.

A Worldwide Problem

The prevalence of forced marriage is particularly acute in certain Middle Eastern and some Islamic countries, where the birth of a girl child is often stigmatized. In some communities, girls are married off at alarmingly young ages, while others are abducted and forced into marriage without their families' knowledge (Christmas and Christmas 181). While forced marriage is often associated with Islamic countries, it is not exclusive to them, nor is it inherently rooted in Islam as a religion (Chaudhry and Kirmani 246). Rather, it is frequently a result of the misinterpretation and misuse of Islamic teachings (Abu-Lughod, *The Cunning* 15). Forced marriage, often cited as an example of the subjugation of women in Islamic societies, is routinely misrepresented as pervasive across all Islamic cultures (Hassan 325). In actuality, forced marriage is a complex issue rooted in socioeconomic, cultural, and political contexts rather than strictly religious ones.

Forced marriage is not confined to specific regions or cultures. For example, forced marriage remains a significant concern in the United Kingdom, particularly within some immigrant communities, and in the United States, while more prevalent historically (especially up until the 1950s), it continues to occur within immigrant populations from various nationalities and religious groups (Chantler and McCarry 95; Le Strat et al. 530). Furthermore, forced marriage manifests in various forms across diverse regions, including Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas, where trafficking and the sale of women, exacerbated by globalization, frequently lead to such unions, trapping vulnerable girls in cycles of exploitation (Cordova-Pozo et al. 250; Siddiqi and Bisailon 5, 7; Idemudia 35). This global prevalence is reflected in the diverse range of affected countries, spanning economic and cultural spectrums. Some countries with the highest reported rates include Bangladesh, Guinea, Afghanistan, and Yemen, where over half of young women are forced into marriage. The practice is also widespread in Indonesia, Pakistan, South Sudan, and Mali, with at least thirty percent of girls married by the age of 18 (Aujla 550). Other affected countries include the Central African Republic, Niger, Chad, Mozambique, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and India (Bhat and Verma 442). Even within a country like the United Kingdom, forced marriage is not geographically isolated, occurring across cities, towns, and rural areas, impacting individuals from various religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds (Gangoli et al. 32).

This global context is crucial when considering the evolution of scholarly work on forced marriages, particularly within Islamic contexts. Over the past three decades, these studies have shifted significantly. Early anthropological research often interpreted Islamic texts as supportive of arranged marriages, focusing on ethnographies of these practices within socioreligious frameworks. However, this essentialist approach, which often failed to account for postcolonial influences, has been critiqued. Since the 1990s, feminist scholarship has broadened the discourse considerably, examining gender dynamics and questioning traditional interpretations of Islam's stance on marital relations and autonomy in marriage, offering a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding forced marriage (Gill and Anitha 220).

The Intersections and Divergences of Forced, Arranged, and Child Marriages

Forced marriage, arranged marriage, and child marriage are often confused, but understanding the nuances between these three practices is crucial. Walker (2022) and Mahmood (2023) define it as a situation where an individual is deprived of the freedom to choose whether, whom, or when to marry (50; 34). The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* emphasizes that marriage must be entered into with the free and full consent of both parties (Article 16/2). These definitions highlight the centrality of consent, with any form of pressure—physical, emotional, economic, or psychological—constituting a violation of this principle. While the definitions are gender-neutral, women are disproportionately affected by forced marriages (Mir-Hosseini, “Arranged” 90; Wadud, “Honor” 80). Men can also be victims, particularly in cultures where paternal authority dictates marital choices (Robertson 199; Caputo 206; Idriss NP11906; Muhsen, *Sold* 101).

Moving beyond the definition of forced marriage, it is important to distinguish it from arranged marriage. In contrast to forced marriages, arranged marriages are typically characterized by the involvement

of families or community elders in the selection of a spouse. While the individuals involved may have some degree of choice, the final decision often rests with their families. The line between arranged and forced marriage can become blurred when pressure, coercion, or manipulation are used to influence the individual's decision, even if they formally agree to the union (Cordova-Pozo et al. 3; Bhat and Verma 442). The key difference between forced and arranged marriage lies in the degree of genuine consent. In a forced marriage, consent is entirely absent or rendered meaningless due to coercion. In an arranged marriage, while consent may be present, it can be compromised by familial or social pressures (Nour 860). The spectrum ranges from freely chosen arranged marriages to those where the level of choice is so limited as to be indistinguishable from forced marriages. Arranged marriages, common in countries like India and Afghanistan, further blur the line, as they are often culturally accepted but can sometimes involve coercion (Gangoli et al. 28).

The concept of consent in forced marriages is complex. Some scholars argue that factors like poverty or bride price can undermine a woman's ability to give genuine consent, as financial pressures may influence her decision (Gangoli et al. 26; Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women* 88). This lack of genuine consent is particularly pronounced in cases of child marriage, where the inherent vulnerability of a minor makes such consent highly questionable. Child marriage, defined as any marriage where one or both spouses are under the age of 18, is a distinct but related issue (Horii 1058). While not all child marriages are explicitly forced, they often are, as children inherently lack the maturity and autonomy to provide genuine consent (Esthappan et al. 5739). Even when not explicitly forced, child marriages often involve significant pressure and can have devastating consequences for the child's education, health, and overall well-being (United Nations, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* 2024 5, 30). Muhsen's narrative provides a stark example of this, as her abduction and forced child marriage highlight the profound lack of genuine consent essential in marriage (*Sold* 130).

Given the inherent power imbalance and the compromised capacity for informed consent, child marriage is often legally defined and treated as a form of forced marriage (Dauvergne and Millbank 72). This legal definition underscores the particularly egregious nature of child marriage as a subset of forced marriage, due to the minor's inability to provide legal consent (Dauvergne and Millbank 60; Caputo 206). The issue of consent is further complicated by situations where it is given after the marriage begins, raising questions about whether such unions should still be classified as forced (Dauvergne and Millbank 72). This challenge to the concept of consent is emphasized in Muhsen's confrontation with the Yemeni official who attempts to legitimize her marriage as an arranged one, based on her guardian's consent. Muhsen's defiant response, "It's false as far I am concerned, I told him angrily. I have studied the Quran and I know it says it is wrong to force girls into marriage so I don't accept that those certificates are genuine," directly challenges the notion that any form of consent, especially in her case, was valid (*Sold* 212).

Understanding the complex interplay between consent, coercion, and cultural practices in forced, arranged, and child marriages, it is crucial to distinguish between these forms of union to avoid paternalistic legislation that may restrict consensual cultural practices while effectively addressing the harms of forced unions. Forced marriage, recognized as a human rights violation akin to slavery due to its denial of

individual freedom to enter or exit the union, often overlaps with the concept of servile marriage (Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad* 55). Servile marriage, a particularly egregious form of forced marriage, involves treating women as property, often exchanged for payment or used to settle debts. Child marriage, as a subset of forced marriage, is particularly egregious due to the minor's inability to provide legal consent (Dauvergne and Millbank 62; Caputo 207). Forced marriage, including such forms as servile and child marriage, violates international human rights standards, such as the [*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*](#), the [*Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)*](#), and the [*Convention on Rights of the Child \(CRC\)*](#), leading to children deprivation of education and thus violating [*The Right to Education*](#).

Islamic Principles and Forced Marriage

While Islam explicitly condemns forced marriages and upholds the principle of consent, patriarchal interpretations of religious teachings and entrenched cultural norms in many Islamic societies have perpetuated the practice, leading to systemic violence against women and the reinforcement of gendered inequalities. Islam, as a religion, does not endorse forced marriages, even for men; a girl should be married only when she wishes (Hussain and Radwan 47; Muhsen, *Sold* 44). However, in many Islamic countries, forced marriages, particularly of young girls, are often justified through traditional interpretations of Islam (Anitha and Gill 123). This practice stems from societies where cultural norms have been intertwined with religious teachings, as policymakers and religious leaders have historically equated their customs with Islam, using religion to legitimize harmful practices (Arnez 17). This intertwining of culture and religion creates vicious social structures where both women and men face restrictions over their choices (Badran 55). Fortunately, Muhsen spoke up and fought to unveil this malicious, irreligious social practice. She states: "I had truth on my side and that made me brave" (*Sold* 266-267).

Prevalent cultural practices, such as forced marriages, are then perpetuated by subsequent generations. Such restrictive social structures, which limit women's ability to express and pursue their choices for a life partner, often lead to violence against women in many dreadful forms, such as honor killings, domestic violence, and coercion into unnatural sexual behaviors (Ahmady 48; Hossain and Taylor 347). Subsequently, such experiences are internalized by women through socialization processes that oblige them to accept their subordinate status and hope for change only through sustained societal transformations (Mubarak 53). However, prevailing social stigmas surrounding forced marriage and violence against women often preclude due consideration of individual cases. Efforts to challenge these deeply entrenched, yet adaptable, social boundaries are often met with resistance and even force (Hussain and Radwan 49). Consequently, gendered interpretations of Islam, the influence of Islamism, and prevailing sociopolitical conditions contribute to a complex array of circumstances that can range from the commodification of women to their exploitation within the sex trade (Sayyid and Vakil 55).

This intricate interplay of cultural, economic, and social factors within Islamic societies often rationalizes forced marriages through misinterpretations of religious texts or cultural traditions that prioritize familial honor over individual rights (Kapoor and Priya 403; Muhsen, *Sold* 78). These deeply

ingrained cultural norms, which often dictate social behaviors and decisions, place considerable emphasis on family honor and societal expectations (Mazurana and Benelli 268; Muhsen, *Sold* 112). A daughter's marriage is frequently perceived as a means to secure familial alliances, enhance economic stability, or protect the family's reputation (Muhsen, *Sold* 113). For families, particularly those residing in conservative or rural environments, a daughter's marriage can symbolize the preservation of tradition and the fulfillment of cultural obligations. Religious misinterpretations are instrumentalized to validate forced marriages, perpetuating the misconception that such practices are congruent with Islamic principles. Patriarchal structures and selective interpretations of religious texts contribute to these misinterpretations. Islamic jurisprudence explicitly underscores the importance of consent in marriage, as evidenced by the Qur'anic verse, "O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion" (Qur'an, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, "An-Nisa'" 4:19). In addition, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) declared, "A previously married woman has more right to herself, and a virgin must be asked for her consent" (Sahih al-Bukhari, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Book 67, Hadith 93, Vol. 7, 115). These authentic religious teachings are often overshadowed by patriarchal interpretations, thus enabling the unchecked perpetuation of forced marriages. Furthermore, the social stigmatization of unmarried women intensifies the pressure. In numerous communities, remaining single is perceived as a familial failure, resulting in hasty or coerced marital arrangements to avert social ostracization (Mir-Hosseini, "Honor" 401). This stigma disproportionately affects women, diminishing their autonomy and perpetuating a cycle where cultural and religious pressures are inextricably linked.

Poverty and lack of education are critical drivers of forced marriage. Families in economically disadvantaged circumstances often view marriage as a pragmatic solution to alleviate financial burdens. Marrying off a daughter can reduce household expenses, provide economic security through dowries, or shift financial responsibility to the husband's family (Hossain 568; Muhsen, *Sold* 116). This transactional view of marriage dehumanizes young girls, reducing their value to economic assets. Furthermore, limited access to education exacerbates women's vulnerability to forced marriage (Kidman 663; Muhsen, *Sold* 118). Girls deprived of education are less likely to recognize their rights or envision alternative futures (Muhsen, *Sold* 204). Educational deprivation not only limits personal development but also restricts opportunities for economic independence (Kabeer and de Haan 990). Without education, girls remain dependent on familial structures, making them susceptible to coercion (Hussain and Radwan 45).

Forced marriage perpetuates cycles of poverty, trapping victims in a web of economic dependency and limiting their career prospects. This undermines their ability to provide for themselves and their children. Furthermore, it stifles the economic progress of entire communities, hindering broader social and economic development efforts (O'Malley et al. 795; Ahmed, "Revisiting" 146). A significant contributing factor is the lack of legal enforcement and awareness. In many regions, laws against forced marriage are either nonexistent or poorly implemented, allowing families to exploit this legal gap with little fear of repercussions (Kidman 670). Strengthening legal frameworks and ensuring access to justice for victims are essential steps in breaking this cycle. However, governments in affected countries often refuse to address the issue, driven by concerns over public image and a lack of genuine care for their citizens (Zimmerman

et al. e260). Some officials even defend forced marriage as a cultural tradition, actively perpetuating the practice (Muhsen, *Sold* 187, 201). Adding to the complexity, victims who have escaped their circumstances have highlighted the role of influential international corporations (Villacampa 375). Multinational companies, particularly in industries like textiles and sex work, stand accused of exploiting women and children, often demonstrating a profound lack of understanding regarding the cultural and gender dynamics of the regions where they operate. This exploitation further entrenches systemic inequalities and stalls progress toward global development (Ullah et al. 62–65).

Forced marriage is a blatant violation of human rights, yet combating it remains a significant challenge due to deeply entrenched sociocultural norms. The consequences are far-reaching, affecting individuals, families, and entire communities (L. Carobene 39; Ullah et al. 65; Ahmed, “Arranged Marriages” 211). The response to forced marriages often depends on the financial and social standing of those involved. When expected payments or conditions are unmet, families may face severe repercussions, including harassment, violence, or even murder, as their social and economic status is threatened (Psaki et al. S14). The pressure exerted by families, tribes, and sometimes the prospective spouse’s family often escalates into violence or honor crimes, justified as attempts to restore social balance (Kapoor and Desai 408). These acts perpetuate cycles of abuse and oppression, further entrenching systemic gender inequality (Idriss NP11920–NP11921).

The Persistence of Forced Marriage in Yemen

Yemen, a country on the southern Arabian Peninsula, exemplifies the persistence of forced marriage practices. Despite enduring civil wars, coups, and major upheaval, little has changed for its citizens, particularly regarding forced marriages and child brides (King 32). Deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions, these practices are often defended by survivors and activists who emphasize the complexity of the issue and caution against oversimplified interventions by Western nations, which are sometimes perceived as imposing moral judgments (Al Salahi and Al Aazi 392; Muhsen, *Sold* vii). Amidst this complex landscape, women’s rights in Yemen remain severely curtailed, with women often facing invisibility in public/private life and yet demonstrating remarkable solidarity (Muhsen, *Sold* 12, 17, 28, 29). This invisibility and the systemic silencing of women’s voices directly contribute to the profound psychological and emotional trauma inflicted by forced marriage, a reality vividly illustrated in Zana Muhsen’s memoir, *Sold*. Her harrowing account of abduction, forced marriage at a young age, and subsequent domestic abuse underscores the urgent need for systemic change to protect vulnerable individuals.

Muhsen’s story is a stark reminder of the devastating toll these practices take on victims, who often endure years of suffering with little hope of escape. This study explores the recurring themes of forced marriage in Islamic societies, examining the interplay of cultural norms, family honor, and individual agency. *Sold* serves as a poignant example, illustrating how victims and their families grapple with remorse and guilt, often misinterpreting values like honor and shame. The pursuit of family honor, frequently tied to girls’ perceived behavior, drives forced marriages, with families justifying extreme measures in the name

of religion (G. Carobene 75; Philbrick Yadav 55). Male relatives' desire to control behavior further violates victims' rights, denying them autonomy and perpetuating systemic gender inequality. Despite the harm caused, forced marriage is often rationalized by families, while societal attitudes downplay violence against women, blaming victims for their circumstances (Aujla 552; Durac and Fakhoury 295). The civil war has drastically worsened the situation for children and women in Yemen, a crisis that UNICEF Yemen is actively monitoring.

Despite growing awareness and engagement with gender issues, forced and child marriages persist in many Islamic countries. These practices have drawn international attention, sparking protests and campaigns aimed at their abolition, often led by powerful Western nations. Literary works, including novels, songs, poems, memoirs, and life writing by authors from affected regions, depict the helplessness of victims and shed light on their struggles. Zana Muhsen's *Sold*, for instance, chronicles her abduction and forced marriage at the age of 15, followed by years of abuse and exploitation. While such marriages are prevalent in many Muslim-majority countries, they often go unreported, leaving countless victims without recourse (G. Carobene 77). This harsh reality encourages Muhsen to continuously present her story. She states: "I will always agree to anything that might help to spread the story further and I am always grateful for help from anyone" (*Sold* 264). The persistence of forced marriage underscores the need for a multifaceted approach that addresses legal, cultural, and economic dimensions. By addressing these interconnected issues, systems that perpetuate this violation of human rights can be dismantled, creating a future where individuals are free to make choices about their own lives.

Literature's Role in Combating Forced Marriage

Literature, particularly narratives of lived experience, offers a powerful lens through which to examine the complexities of forced marriage and its impact on individuals. Nonfiction works, such as Zana Muhsen's *Sold*, provide authentic, firsthand accounts of the atrocities of forced marriage, offering a human dimension to the issue that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. These personal stories reveal the underlying power imbalances and enduring effects on victims' lives, rejecting the notion that forced marriage is merely a cultural tradition (Muhsen, *Sold* 102; Muhsen, *A Promise* 91). By sharing their lived experiences, survivors foster emotional connections with readers, encouraging a deeper understanding of the issue and its far-reaching consequences. These narratives challenge societal norms, dismantle stereotypes, and inspire action by giving voice to the often-unheard experiences of those affected by forced marriage. Fiction, on the other hand, explores these complexities through imagined narratives and characters. Works like Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) address themes such as cultural oppression, gender inequality, and displacement, indirectly highlighting the systemic causes of forced marriage. By weaving these themes into compelling plots, fiction broadens the reach of the message and sparks critical discussions about the societal structures that perpetuate such practices (Altun 387; Chiranjeevi 644). Both fiction and nonfiction bridge the gap between fact and artistry, using vivid storytelling and reflective prose to craft relatable narratives that resonate across time and place.

Nonfiction, including memoirs and autobiographies, is increasingly recognized as a vital literary genre due to its ability to blend factual accounts with narrative artistry. Scholars such as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2021), argue that nonfiction employs literary techniques—such as character development, thematic exploration, and narrative structure—to transform personal experiences into universal stories. They emphasize that nonfiction is not merely a record of events but a creative endeavor that engages readers emotionally and intellectually, much like fiction (45). In their 2020 work, *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith and Watson Autobiography Studies Reader*, they further explore how life writing challenges dominant cultural narratives and gives voice to marginalized perspectives, highlighting its role as a transformative literary genre (33, 78, 88, 102). Similarly, Leigh Gilmore, in *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (2017), underscores how nonfiction narratives disrupt societal norms and amplify underrepresented voices (23). By documenting individual lives within cultural, historical, and emotional contexts, nonfiction enriches readers' understanding of diverse perspectives and challenges societal norms (Lejeune 24). Authors of nonfiction, like Muhsen, play a vital role in raising awareness and advocating for change, using the power of storytelling to confront deeply entrenched societal practices. Muhsen's *Sold* serves as both a cautionary tale and a call to action, urging societies to confront the injustices faced by women and girls. By humanizing abstract issues, nonfiction fosters empathy and understanding, ultimately contributing to the fight for women's rights and social justice. Through its unique blend of fact and artistry, nonfiction continues to be a transformative force in literature and society (Adams 56).

Challenging Forced Marriage via Writing

Zana Muhsen's memoir, *Sold*, coauthored with ghostwriter Andrew Crofts, gained international attention after its 1991 publication. The book details Muhsen's harrowing experience of forced marriage and abduction, vividly portraying her loss of home, family, and identity, alongside the psychological scars of her ordeal. Sparked by journalist Eileen McDonald's 1987 exposé, public outcry led to Zana's return to England in 1988, though she left her child behind. Adapted by BBC Radio 4 ([Stolen Brides \(Kidnapping Documentary\) | Real Stories](#)) and followed by a 2000 sequel, *A Promise to Nadia*, *Sold*'s multiple republications (2001, 2010, and 2011) testify to its enduring relevance as forced marriage remains a global crisis demanding urgent action (Muhsen, *Sold* vi; vii).

The collaboration between Zana Muhsen and ghostwriter Andrew Crofts in *Sold* raises questions about authorship and authenticity but ultimately underscores the memoir's power as a testament to resilience. Crofts's role in structuring Muhsen's story highlights the tension between preserving a personal voice and crafting a marketable narrative. Despite concerns that ghostwriting may overshadow the author's voice, it amplifies stories that might otherwise go unheard, raising awareness about forced marriage and gender-based violence (Adams 35; Couser 33; Eakin 55). While the process involves ethical considerations, such as balancing emotional truth with polished prose, *Sold* remains a compelling account of systemic injustices and individual agency (Zimmerman, *Ethics of Memory* 23; Gilmore 110).

The authenticity of memoirs, particularly those involving ghostwriters, is often debated. Critics argue that crafted dialogues and narrative techniques, while enhancing literary appeal, may fictionalize certain elements. However, emotional truth can transcend strict factual accuracy (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography Now* 112). Muhsen's memoir is widely regarded as credible due to its consistent retelling in interviews, its childlike narrative style reflecting her youth, and its alignment with her public testimonies. *Sold* presents a powerful blend of compelling narrative and factual accuracy, using literary devices to amplify Muhsen's experiences rather than diminish their authenticity. Transparency about the ghostwriting process is essential, as it shapes how readers perceive and engage with the narrative (Miller 88; Yagoda 112). Ultimately, *Sold* exemplifies how memoirs can balance personal truth with literary craft to expose the injustices of forced marriage and inspire change (Whitlock 38). Recognizing the power of narrative but perhaps lacking the confidence or expertise to craft a compelling memoir independently, Muhsen sought out Crofts's skills as a writer to ensure her story reached the widest possible audience and had the greatest impact (*Sold* 34). This collaboration allowed her to focus on sharing her experiences while Crofts provided the structure and polish necessary to create a publishable work (*Sold* 35).

Zana Muhsen's memoir, *Sold*, offers a harrowing testament to the lived experience of forced marriage, powerfully demonstrating the impact of nonfiction narratives in raising awareness and advocating for social change. As Thomas Couser (2021) argues, nonfiction, like fiction, employs literary techniques to transform personal experiences into universal stories, engaging readers emotionally and intellectually. At the age of fifteen, Muhsen was coerced into marriage with a relative in Yemen, abruptly uprooted from her life in the United Kingdom, and subjected to sexual exploitation and servitude. Her narrative provides invaluable insight into the brutal realities faced by victims, exposing the devastating physical and psychological toll of this practice. Muhsen's story unfolds with her sudden relocation to Yemen, ostensibly for a family vacation. Upon arrival, she discovered her father's prearranged marriage, a union enacted without her knowledge or consent. Her subsequent experiences of marital rape and domestic slavery starkly illustrate the brutal consequences of forced marriage, transforming what should be a partnership into a mechanism of control that stripped her of autonomy and dignity. Driven by a desperate need to expose the horrors of forced marriage and, more importantly, to liberate her sister, Nadia, who remained trapped in Yemen, Muhsen decided to share her story. Her memoir became a powerful act of resistance, a testament to her resilience, and a plea for justice—narratives that, as Gilmore (2017) argues, disrupt societal norms and amplify underrepresented voices.

Muhsen's narrative of betrayal is central to understanding her experience. Born to a Yemeni father and a British mother, Zana and her sister, Nadia, were raised in Birmingham, England. Their father's manipulation, luring them to Yemen under the pretense of a holiday, only to sell them into forced marriages, underscores the inherent conflict between Western and Yemeni cultural values. While Zana and Nadia were raised in a relatively liberal environment, their father's actions reflect the patriarchal norms prevalent in his homeland, where women are often treated as property, their lives dictated by the men in their families (Muhsen, *Sold* 54). This act of betrayal not only shatters their trust but also ignites Zana's determination to fight for her sister's freedom (Muhsen, *Sold* 207; Muhsen, *A Promise* 15). Muhsen's narrative powerfully

exposes the devastating consequences of this abrupt cultural dislocation. Muhsen emphasizes this idea of alienation: “I felt I had been left on my own at the end of the world” (*Sold* 29). Her descriptions of life in Yemen confront the reader with the stark contrast between her expectations and the harsh reality she faced. For instance, her poignant statement, “I had imagined a land of exotic beauty, but what I found was a prison”, encapsulates the profound disillusionment and trauma she experienced, highlighting the broader theme of cultural alienation and the loss of her former life (Muhsen, *Sold* 45).

Zana Muhsen’s *Sold* powerfully illustrates the interconnectedness of forced marriage with broader issues of gender inequality and oppression. As Smith and Watson (2021, 2024) argue, life writing employs literary techniques to transform personal experiences into universal stories, engaging readers emotionally and intellectually (15; 23). Muhsen’s narrative achieves precisely this, exposing the systemic nature of gender inequality within the context of forced marriage. In Yemen, Zana and Nadia are stripped of their autonomy and subjected to relentless abuse, their husbands viewing them as possessions rather than partners (Muhsen, *Sold* 45, 50, 112). Their in-laws enforce strict gender roles that confine them to domestic servitude, a reflection of deeply entrenched patriarchal traditions. For instance, Muhsen describes being forced to perform grueling household chores from dawn until late at night, while her husband and his family exerted complete control over her life. She writes, “I was no longer a person with dreams and aspirations; I was a slave, a thing to be used and discarded” (Muhsen, *Sold* 78). Muhsen thus highlights the dehumanization of women in patriarchal societies and the ways in which gender inequality perpetuates cycles of abuse. This dehumanization is further compounded by the lack of educational and economic opportunities afforded to women, which perpetuates their dependence on male relatives and reinforces cycles of inequality (Muhsen, *Sold* 110). Zana, Nadia, and other girls in the village are denied access to education and are expected to perform household chores and submit to their husbands’ demands, reflecting the broader societal expectation that women’s primary roles are domestic and subservient (Muhsen, *Sold* 120).

Despite this systemic oppression, Zana Muhsen’s story in *Sold* exemplifies resilience as a powerful tool in the fight against injustice. Even while enduring forced marriage, abuse, and isolation in Yemen, Muhsen’s unwavering determination to escape and return to her family in England demonstrates her refusal to accept her circumstances as final. Her repeated attempts to contact her mother and seek help via sending hidden messages in cassettes, sending letters, and asking for help from individuals and even from the British embassy, though initially unsuccessful, highlight her relentless pursuit of freedom (Muhsen, *Sold* 120). Ultimately, her perseverance pays off, and she secures her liberation, reclaiming her agency. Muhsen states: “Throughout the next eight years I told myself, every day, I was going to get out of that village, that there was no way I was going to stay there forever. It was that determination that kept me alive I think” (*Sold* 50). By sharing her harrowing experience in *Sold*, Muhsen transforms her personal struggle into a broader act of resistance, using her voice to expose systemic injustices and warn others of the dangers of forced marriages and gender-based oppression. As she writes in the preface, “I want my story to be a warning to others, so that no one else has to suffer what I went through” (*Sold* 8). This act of storytelling not only

empowers Muhsen but also serves as a call to action, inspiring collective awareness and advocacy against the oppression of women and girls worldwide (Muhsen, *A Promise* 12).

Muhsen's decision to share her story in *Sold* is a profound act of feminist resistance. It exemplifies the power of personal narratives to challenge and dismantle systems of injustice, reclaiming her own voice and amplifying those of other silenced women. *Sold* exposes the systemic injustices of forced marriage and human trafficking, indicting practices like child marriage—which, as UNICEF reports, affects approximately 12 million girls annually, often resulting in lifelong physical and psychological trauma, lost educational opportunities, and stunted personal and economic growth. Her narrative compels readers to confront the inadequacies of existing legal frameworks and the urgent need for international cooperation to protect vulnerable populations. By sharing her harrowing experience, Muhsen not only empowers other survivors, including her sister, who remains in Yemen with her children, to speak out but also counters narratives that position any group as a monolithic other. Instead, she highlights the systemic oppression of women as a global issue, not confined to any single culture or religion. She explains that hearing her story of being abducted and sold into forced marriage raises sympathy, but without real action. As she states, "Everyone was sympathetic, but no one knew what to do. I decided that I should write a book. I felt that if I could tell that I would have something which I could use to publicize Nadia's plight" (Muhsen, *Sold* 261). *Sold* is a powerful feminist text, advocating for women's autonomy and dignity and challenging patriarchal structures that enable forced marriage. Muhsen's memoir underscores the intersection of gender, religion, and national identity, revealing how various forms of violence perpetuate patriarchal systems that burden women across different contexts. Through her writing, Muhsen fosters solidarity, urging readers to recognize shared struggles against systems of oppression and to move beyond reductive stereotypes that divide rather than unite. Ultimately, *Sold* exposes the injustices of forced marriage while highlighting the necessity of feminist activism in combating gender-based violence and advancing equality worldwide.

The psychological devastation inflicted by forced marriage, as poignantly illustrated in Zana Muhsen's memoir *Sold*, serves as a powerful catalyst for feminist activism, fueling the fight against gender-based violence and propelling the global pursuit of equality. Muhsen's experiences of betrayal, isolation, and hopelessness underscore the urgent need to dismantle the patriarchal structures that perpetuate this harmful practice. Muhsen's narrative vividly captures the profound psychological impact of forced marriage. The immediate sense of betrayal, as when she realized her father had manipulated her into a marriage she never consented to, shatters a victim's trust and sense of security (Muhsen, *Sold* 46). This betrayal, often by those closest to them, coupled with the imposed isolation of being uprooted and placed in an unfamiliar, often oppressive environment, creates fertile ground for deep psychological trauma. Like Muhsen, who felt completely alone and cut off from her previous life in Birmingham when she was forced to live in Yemen, many victims experience an intense sense of isolation (Muhsen, *Sold* 89). This isolation is often exacerbated by cultural and linguistic barriers, making it nearly impossible to communicate their distress or seek help (Muhsen, *Sold* 23, 45). Feminist activism amplifies these silenced voices, demanding accountability and challenging the cultural norms that normalize such abuse.

The psychological toll manifests in a pervasive sense of hopelessness. Abruptly thrust into a Yemeni village, fifteen-year-old Zana faced a daunting cultural chasm, compounded by the isolating weight of a language she barely understood. This sudden immersion into an unfamiliar world, where customs and communication were foreign, amplified her vulnerability and deepened her sense of displacement. Muhsen's internal conflict—the struggle between her desire for freedom and the overwhelming pressure to conform—is a common experience (Muhsen, *Sold* 34). Muhsen writes, “I felt like a bird trapped in a cage, with no hope of ever flying free”, a metaphor that poignantly conveys the suffocating loneliness and despair she endured (*Sold* 89). This constant tension and anxiety, coupled with the lack of control over one's life and future, can lead to deep despair. Muhsen states: “My thoughts were going round and round in my head. ... I had no idea how to handle the situation” (*Sold* 46). Muhsen enforces that the experience made her lose trust in everyone except her sister, who underwent the same dilemma of being sold into forced marriage (Muhsen, *Sold* 51). As Muhsen's experience demonstrates, even after escaping, the psychological scars of forced marriage endure, manifesting as guilt, shame, and the lingering effects of abuse (Muhsen, *Sold* 78). These emotional wounds can lead to serious mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), highlighting the crucial need for comprehensive support systems, including mental health services, counseling, and safe spaces for healing and reintegration (Muhsen, *Sold* 102; Hunersen et al. 4560). Muhsen emphasizes this when she states: “Every sudden noise made me jump; every man's voice made me shiver inside” (*Sold* 273).

Forced marriage often involves sexual abuse, adding another layer of trauma. Muhsen's account of the horrific sexual abuse she endured at the hands of her husband is, tragically, not unique (Muhsen, *Sold* 56). Muhsen was repeatedly raped and obliged to have sexual intercourse or else be punished (*Sold* 53). Trapped in abusive situations with no means of escape, victims of forced marriage frequently experience this additional trauma, with devastating and long-lasting consequences (Hunerson 4554). The psychological effects of forced marriage, as exemplified by Muhsen's experience, are a stark reminder of the global struggle for gender equality. Feminist activism confronts this violence directly, challenging the culture of silence and demanding justice for survivors. The stories of survivors like Muhsen galvanize this activism. By challenging patriarchal structures, advocating for legal reforms, providing support services, and raising awareness about the devastating consequences of forced marriage, feminist movements are working to prevent this human rights violation and create a world where all individuals can live free from violence and coercion.

The fight against forced marriage is inextricably linked to the broader fight for gender equality, and the psychological well-being of survivors is at the heart of this struggle. Contemporary feminist thought emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, recognizing that gender-based violence is often intertwined with other forms of oppression, such as racism, classism, and homophobia. Muhsen's narrative, by giving voice to her experience, contributes to this understanding, highlighting the interconnectedness of these struggles and the need for transnational feminist movements to address these complex issues through global solidarity and collaboration. Feminist theory, particularly Islamic feminist perspectives, provides crucial frameworks for analyzing forced marriages, recognizing their violation of women's autonomy and agency.

By examining the intersection of gender, religion, and culture, feminist analysis deconstructs the patriarchal systems that enable forced marriages. Zana Muhsen's *Sold* exemplifies this, showcasing how cultural norms prioritize male authority, leading to the exploitation and dehumanization of women. Muhsen's narrative powerfully illustrates the need for feminist interventions to challenge these systems and empower women to resist oppression.

The memoir reveals a stark contrast between the lives of women in Yemeni cities and those in rural villages. While urban women may have access to education, the right to choose their partners, opportunities for work, and freedom of movement—lives more closely resembling those of women in the United Kingdom—village women often face vastly different realities (*Sold* 214). In rural areas, where economic circumstances often dictate social structures, women's lives are frequently circumscribed by male control. They have limited access to education, little or no say in marriage decisions, restricted movement, and limited opportunities beyond the domestic sphere. Muhsen's narrative underscores how these patriarchal structures, often reinforced by economic necessity, contribute to the exploitation and dehumanization of women, highlighting the urgent need for feminist interventions to empower women in all contexts and challenge the systems that perpetuate their oppression.

Muhsen's narrative technique plays a crucial role in conveying the impact of her fight against forced marriage. *Sold* is written in a straightforward, unembellished style, using simple language and concise sentences. This simplicity amplifies the emotional weight of her story, allowing the raw intensity of Muhsen's experiences to take center stage. By avoiding complex language or literary flourishes, Muhsen ensures accessibility for a wide audience while creating a sense of immediacy and authenticity. This straightforward style is particularly effective in conveying the trauma of her childhood and adolescence. Muhsen's depiction of these experiences elicits profound empathy, not through dramatic embellishments, but through the stark, unvarnished truth of her suffering. The lack of a rigid temporal structure or confined geographical focus further enhances the memoir's impact, creating a sense of timelessness and universality that transcends its specific context, making it relatable to anyone who has experienced loss, displacement, or oppression.

Muhsen's narrative technique powerfully conveys the devastating impact of forced marriage and her unwavering fight for freedom. Vivid descriptions of her forced removal from her home, the loss of her childhood innocence, and the unimaginable hardships she endures in Yemen make her suffering palpably real. This direct, unflinching portrayal forces the reader to confront the brutal realities of gender-based violence. Further enriching the narrative, Muhsen employs potent symbolism. Her confinement becomes a metaphor for both the chaos of war and the systemic oppression of women in patriarchal societies, while her repeated escape attempts mirror the struggles of women trapped in cycles of violence. These symbolic elements add depth to the narrative, transforming Muhsen's personal story into a powerful activism tool. Muhsen's ability to convey both the depths of her suffering and the strength of her resolve is a testament to the power of her narrative voice.

The writing style of *Sold* plays a crucial role in enhancing the memoir's emotional and rhetorical impact. Through its simplicity, symbolism, and unflinching honesty, the narrative not only conveys the depth of Muhsen's suffering but also critiques the broader social structures that enable such injustices. By sharing her story, Muhsen not only reclaims her voice but also inspires readers to reflect on the universal themes of resilience, empowerment, and the enduring fight for justice. Through elements of setting, imagery, symbolism, and diction, *Sold* takes readers through the traumatic realities of forced marriage, guiding them toward courage, hope, and empowerment. By calling on readers to stand vigilant against the abomination of forced marriage, the memoir's resolution serves as an encouragement to embrace hope and strength, especially in the face of hardship.

Conclusion

Muhsen's memoir, *Sold*, vividly portrays her traumatic experience of forced marriage and exploitation. It highlights the cultural, patriarchal, and socioeconomic factors that perpetuate this practice, emphasizing its devastating physical, psychological, and economic impacts on victims. Muhsen's story underscores the systemic gender inequality and patriarchal norms that normalize forced marriage, often justified through misinterpretations of religious teachings. Muhsen writes as an act of resistance, a defiant assertion of her voice and agency in the face of dehumanizing circumstances. Her narrative techniques add a powerful effect, employing vivid imagery, visceral descriptions, and an unflinching honesty to immerse the reader in her harrowing journey and expose the brutal realities of forced marriage. By giving voice to survivors, narratives like *Sold* challenge societal norms, inspire global action, and contribute to the broader fight for gender equality and human rights. Ultimately, addressing forced marriage demands both systemic change and a shift in cultural attitudes to protect vulnerable individuals and promote justice.

Conflicts of interest

The author certifies that she has no affiliations or involvement with any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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