

Misyar Marriage: Islamic Customs, Debates, and Moral Dilemma

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ABSTRACT: Misyar marriage, a form of marital arrangement permitted under specific interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence, allows spouses to forgo certain traditional rights and obligations, including cohabitation and financial maintenance. While recognized in several Sunni-majority societies, this practice has incited extensive theological, social, and ethical debate within contemporary Islamic society. This study critically investigates the Misyar marriage by analyzing its legal foundations, regional variations, and contested interpretations through the lens of Islamic law and socio-cultural norms. Employing a qualitative research framework, it synthesizes insights from scholarly written sources and interview-based narratives to evaluate the broader implications of Misyar on women's rights, family structures, and moral theology. The paper argues that although Misyar marriage provides legal flexibility for particular social groups, it often operates within patriarchal parameters that undermine its ethical legitimacy. The findings emphasize the need for a more contextually sensitive and ethically grounded approach to Islamic marital jurisprudence that reconciles religious principles with evolving social and legal realities.

KEYWORDS: Misyar marriage, Islamic law, gender ethics, moral theology, feminist critique

INTRODUCTION

Marriage holds a foundational position in the Islamic moral and social order, functioning simultaneously as a legal contract and a spiritual covenant that fosters familial harmony, social cohesion, and moral stability (Esposito & DeLong-Bas, 2001; Kamali, 2008). Within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence, marriage represents both an ethical commitment and a legal institution that defines gendered responsibilities, economic obligations, and kinship rights. Yet, the interpretation and practice of marriage have not remained static; rather, they have evolved across different cultural, economic, and temporal contexts in the Muslim world (Hallaq, 2009; Sonbol, 2003).

Among the contemporary manifestations of Islamic marital practice, Misyar marriage has emerged as one of the most debated phenomena. This form of contractual marriage allows spouses (most often women) to forgo certain rights traditionally associated with marriage, such as shared residence, financial maintenance and equal access to companionship (Al-Zuhayli, 2012; Yamani, 2008). While legally sanctioned in some Sunni-majority countries, especially in the Gulf region, Misyar has provoked extensive scholarly and ethical debates regarding its theological legitimacy and its implications for gender justice within Islamic law (Ali, 2006; El Fadl, 2014).

Existing scholarship on Islamic marriage reveals deep divergences in how contemporary jurists and scholars conceptualize the balance between legal permissibility and moral idealism. Classical jurists viewed the marriage as a sacred social institution central to the preservation of lineage, morality, and social order (Schacht, 1982; Kamali, 2008). However, as modern societies have undergone rapid transformations due to urbanization, globalization, and migration, Islamic family law has adapted to accommodate new socio-economic realities (Hallaq, 2009; Inhorn, 2012).

Several scholars interpret Misyar as a pragmatic legal innovation that responds to growing socio-economic constraints such as delayed marriage, high dowry costs, and male labor migration (Al-Zuhayli, 2012; Inhorn, 2012). Supporters argue that Misyar offers a flexible marital option for individuals unable to meet the financial and logistical demands of conventional marriage (Esposito & DeLong-Bas, 2001; Kamali, 2008). Conversely, feminist and reformist scholars such as Ali (2006) and Barlas (2002) contend that Misyar reinforces patriarchal privilege, reduces women's rights to companionship and financial support, and undermines the ethical essence of marriage as envisioned in the Quran.

Empirical studies in the Gulf region (Yamani, 2008; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005) highlight that Misyar often functions less as an egalitarian choice and more as an adaptation to social pressures that disadvantage women. Consequently, the phenomenon raises profound questions about gender justice, religious authenticity, and the moral evolution of Islamic marital institutions in the modern world. Despite an expanding body of scholarship, few qualitative studies have examined Misyar marriage from a socio-religious and ethical perspective that combines jurisprudential, gendered, and cultural dimensions.

Misyar Marriage: Islamic Customs, Debates, and Moral Dilemma

Although Misyar marriage has attracted increasing scholarly attention, significant gaps persist within the academic discourse surrounding its interpretation and practice.

Theoreticalgap:

Existing scholarship predominantly treats Misyar as an exceptional or anomalous legal construct, rather than situating it within broader theoretical frameworks of Islamic moral theology, gender ethics, and modernity. Limited effort has been made to integrate feminist Islamic thought or postcolonial theoretical perspectives, which could provide a deeper understanding of how religious authority, gendered power, and interpretive practices interact to shape marital norms and ethical subjectivities in Muslim societies.

Empiricalgap:

Empirical investigations into Misyar marriage remain scarce, particularly those that engage with first-hand qualitative data from individuals directly involved in such relationships. The personal experiences, emotional negotiations, and social implications for women in Misyar arrangements have received minimal scholarly attention, especially in contexts beyond the Gulf region where the practice originated and is most prevalent.

Methodologicalgap:

Much of the existing literature relies heavily on textual, doctrinal, or jurisprudential analysis, often neglecting qualitative research designs that could capture the lived and contextual dimensions of Misyar. Approaches such as in-depth interviewing, ethnographic observation, and case study analysis remain underutilized, resulting in a limited understanding of the socio-psychological and cultural realities that underpin the practice.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a multidimensional qualitative approach that integrates textual interpretation, critical discourse analysis, and interview-based inquiry. This methodological synthesis bridges the divide between normative legal theory and lived social experience, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of Misyar marriage as both a theological construct and a socio-cultural phenomenon shaped by gendered hierarchies, moral reasoning, and contemporary transformations in Muslim family life

This study seeks to answer the following questions:-

1. How is Misyar marriage conceptualized and justified within contemporary Islamic jurisprudence and theological discourse?
2. What are the socio-cultural and gender implications of Misyar marriage for women in Muslim societies, particularly in relation to Islamic ideals of marital ethics and justice?

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive research design to examine the theological, legal, and ethical complexities of Misyar marriage. Given the topic's sensitivity and its deep interconnection with personal belief, morality, and gendered experience, a qualitative approach is particularly suited to uncovering nuanced perspectives and subjective meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research adopts an exploratory conceptual framework, synthesizing secondary sources alongside interview-based data to interpret the socio-religious and ethical dimensions of Misyar marriage.

DataCollectionMethods-

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection tool, complemented by extensive documentary analysis of juridical writings, scholarly literature, and media narratives. Although the research was conducted in Nepal, preliminary field investigations indicated no documented cases of Misyar in local Muslim communities. Consequently, the empirical focus shifted to Uttar Pradesh, India, where respondents, including women with lived experience and Islamic scholars, provided informed reflections and narratives about the practice. This approach allows the study to interpret Misyar as a dynamic intersection of law, ethics, and gender in Muslim societies.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants most relevant to the study's objectives. Two categories of respondents were identified:

1. Women with lived experience of Misyar marriage – Five participants from Uttar Pradesh who had entered into Misyar unions.
2. Islamic scholars and jurists – Five respondents, including Muftis and Moulavis, with extensive knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and moral theology concerning Misyar, though not personally engaged in the practice.

This dual-perspective design facilitated triangulation between experiential accounts and scholarly interpretations, enabling the study to juxtapose lived realities with doctrinal and ethical analyses.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity surrounding marriage, religion, and gender, the study adhered strictly to established ethical protocols for qualitative research. Participants were fully informed about the research objectives, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Interviews were conducted with informed consent, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant

Misyar Marriage: Islamic Customs, Debates, and Moral Dilemma

identities. Identifying information was omitted from transcripts and analysis to safeguard privacy, especially considering the social stigma attached to Misyar marriages. All data were securely stored and accessible only to the principal researcher, in compliance with institutional ethical standards.

Data Collection and Supplementary Materials

Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility for participants to narrate personal experiences while allowing the researcher to probe emergent themes. The interview guide addressed:

- Motivations and circumstances leading to Misyar marriage (women participants)
- Perceptions of rights, duties, and power dynamics within the arrangement
- Emotional experiences, notions of dignity, justice, and exploitation
- Interpretations of religious legality versus moral legitimacy (both women and scholars)

Interviews were conducted in neutral, private settings to ensure comfort and openness. Supplementary source- scholarly writings, media reports, and NGO documentation, provided contextual depth, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how legal interpretations intersect with social and ethical considerations.

Methodological Limitations

While this study bridges theoretical discourse and lived experience, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The qualitative design and reliance on a small, purposive sample from Uttar Pradesh restrict generalizability to the broader Muslim world. Additionally, the absence of ethnographic immersion limits the observation of community-level dynamics and social interactions. Nonetheless, the interpretive framework enables rich thematic insights into the legal, ethical, and gendered dimensions of Misyar marriage, offering a foundation for future empirical research on similar practices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a multidisciplinary theoretical framework integrating Islamic legal theory, feminist Islamic ethics, and critical moral theology. This triadic approach enables a holistic understanding of Misyar marriage not only as a juridical construct but also as a moral and gendered practice situated within broader socio-religious transformations in Muslim societies.

1. Islamic Legal Theory and Interpretive Traditions

The first analytical dimension is grounded in Islamic jurisprudence, which permits flexibility in marital contracts as long as the essential elements of marriage-offer, acceptance, witnesses, and dower (mahr), are met. Classical jurists have long recognized that spouses may mutually waive specific rights, thereby legitimizing non-traditional arrangements such as Misyar marriage (Kamali, 2010).

However, this legalist or positivist reasoning has faced critique for divorcing legality from ethical purpose. Scholars including Abou El Fadl (2001) and Kamali (2010) argue that Islamic law should be interpreted in accordance with the higher objectives of Shariah which encompass justice, compassion, and public welfare. From this perspective, a practice cannot be considered authentically Islamic if it contravenes these moral ends. Within this framework, although Misyar is technically permissible, it may undermine maqāṣid related to family preservation, dignity, and social cohesion. While preserving the formal legality of marriage, it can compromise the ethical substance by limiting women's access to emotional, financial, and social security. Accordingly, Islamic legal theory is applied here not solely as textual exegesis but as a moral hermeneutic, evaluating whether Misyar aligns with the ethical aims of Islamic marital law.

2. Feminist Islamic Ethics

The second theoretical lens draws upon feminist Islamic ethics, which critiques patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law and examines their implications for women's moral agency. Scholars such as Amina Wadud (1999), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2003), and Asma Barlas (2002) highlight that much of the fiqh tradition has been shaped by male-dominated hermeneutics, prioritizing formal legality over ethical reciprocity.

From this viewpoint, Misyar exemplifies gendered asymmetries within traditional Islamic jurisprudence. It allows men to retain marital authority while women are often compelled—due to economic, social, or familial pressures—to forgo essential rights such as cohabitation, maintenance, and public acknowledgment. This reflects a negotiated form of subordination: women's consent may be legally recognized, yet ethically constrained. Feminist Islamic ethics thus frames Misyar not merely as a legal phenomenon but as a moral issue embedded in structural inequality, highlighting the tension between the Quranic ideal of human equality (Quran 4:1) and the practical inequities perpetuated by patriarchal interpretations.

3. Critical Moral Theology in Islam

The third component employs critical moral theology, which emphasizes ethical reasoning as central to religious practice. Abou El Fadl (2001) asserts that the legitimacy of any Islamic practice must be evaluated not only by legal compliance but also by its moral intentionality and respect for human dignity.

Applying this lens to Misyar, the analysis is guided by the Quranic vision of marriage as a relationship marked by tranquility, love, and mercy (Quran 30:21). The inquiry is thus reframed: rather than asking only whether Misyar is legally valid, the focus becomes whether it embodies the ethical and spiritual essence of Islamic marriage. Critical moral theology advocates for an ethical turn in

Misyar Marriage: Islamic Customs, Debates, and Moral Dilemma

Islamic jurisprudence, bridging the gap between rule-based legality and the moral-spiritual objectives of Islam, while challenging patriarchal norms that allow legally permissible yet ethically questionable practices to persist.

4. Integrative Theoretical Model

By synthesizing Islamic jurisprudence, feminist ethics, and moral theology, this study adopts an integrative theoretical model for examining Misyar marriage through three intersecting dimensions:

1. Jurisprudential dimension: Why is Misyar considered legally permissible in certain Sunni schools, and what interpretive principles support this allowance?
2. Gender-ethical dimension: How does Misyar influence women's autonomy, dignity, and equality within patriarchal religious frameworks?
3. Moral-theological dimension: Does Misyar fulfill the higher ethical and spiritual purposes of marriage envisioned in Islamic theology?

This integrated approach enables a comprehensive analysis that moves beyond legal positivism, portraying Misyar as both a legal construct and a moral dilemma. It aligns with reformist Islamic scholarship that views law as a living moral system, responsive to justice, compassion, and evolving human realities (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Kamali, 2010; Mir-Hosseini, 2003).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data Analysis and Thematic Findings

The analysis in this study followed a qualitative thematic approach, combining interpretive and critical perspectives drawn from the integrative theoretical framework. Data collected through interviews with Muslim respondents from diverse sectarian, regional, and socioeconomic backgrounds were examined thematically to identify recurring ideas, moral perceptions, and lived experiences surrounding Misyar marriage (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following iterative reading and reflection, four primary thematic clusters emerged: (1) Religious Legitimacy and Juridical Awareness, (2) Gender and Moral Ambivalence, (3) Socioeconomic Pragmatism and Cultural Adaptation, and (4) Ethical Contestation and Theological Reflection.

1. Religious Legitimacy and Juridical Awareness

Respondents across Sunni, Deobandi, and Barelvi affiliations demonstrated substantial awareness of Misyar's juridical permissibility, frequently framing the practice as compliant with Shariah provided that the fundamental elements of marriage -offer, acceptance, witnesses, and mahr, are fulfilled (Kamali, 2010). Many justified Misyar based on legal sanction alone, reflecting a positivist understanding where legitimacy is derived from procedural compliance rather than ethical or social considerations.

For instance, one male respondent noted,

"If both sides agree, the marriage is halal. Islam gives us that right."

Such statements reflect a legalist consciousness consistent with Kamali (2010) and Abou El Fadl (2001), wherein the moral and maqāṣid-oriented purposes of Islamic law are often secondary to formal legality. Conversely, a minority, predominantly women with religious education expressed moral reservations, describing Misyar as "a contract without compassion" that, while lawful, falls short of the Qur'anic ideal of mutual care and emotional stability.

2. Gender and Moral Ambivalence

The gendered dynamics of Misyar emerged as a central theme. Men frequently framed it as a pragmatic solution to social circumstances such as financial hardship, travel, or polygamous obligations, whereas women reported experiences of emotional vulnerability, invisibility, and moral tension.

Several female respondents indicated that their consent was shaped by economic necessity or social pressure rather than full autonomy. One Barelvi woman explained,

"It was not about choice; it was about survival. I agreed because I needed protection, not because I wanted such marriage."

This aligns with Mir-Hosseini (2003) and Wadud (1999), who describe "negotiated agency"-a constrained autonomy within patriarchal structures. Although legally valid, these experiences underscore the ethical ambiguities inherent in Misyar, highlighting persistent gender asymmetries where formal legality may obscure moral inequities.

3. Socioeconomic Pragmatism and Cultural Adaptation

Respondents frequently justified Misyar through the lens of socioeconomic pragmatism, particularly among middle- and lower-income participants. The practice was often framed as an adaptive response to migration, economic instability, and changing family structures, especially in Gulf-influenced communities in India.

Men emphasized Misyar as a "manageable" arrangement during periods of separation due to labor migration, whereas women's narratives revealed emotional strain and social marginalization, illustrating a gendered disparity in how socioeconomic pragmatism is experienced. This reflects broader sociological observations that globalization and labor mobility have reshaped traditional marital norms (Al-Fassi, 2016). Thus, Misyar operates both as a structural adaptation to contemporary socioeconomic pressures and as a moral compromise within Islamic marital ethics.

4. Ethical Contestation and Theological Reflection

Misyar Marriage: Islamic Customs, Debates, and Moral Dilemma

Across sects and demographics, respondents expressed ethical ambivalence regarding Misyar. Some considered it morally permissible due to its legal recognition and mutual consent, while others critiqued it for undermining the Quranic vision of marriage as a relationship imbued with emotional and spiritual depth.

A Deobandi scholar summarized this tension:

"Islam allows Misyar, but it does not encourage it. Lawful does not always mean moral."

This sentiment illustrates the central ethical dilemma: the divergence between legality and morality. It supports Abou El Fadl's (2001) argument that Shariah should be interpreted through an ethical lens prioritizing compassion, dignity, and justice. The findings suggest that Misyar functions as a site of ongoing moral negotiation, with believers interpreting religious norms in light of shifting social realities.

5. Synthesis of Findings

The thematic analysis reveals that Misyar marriage occupies a liminal space between legality and morality, choice and coercion, adaptation and compromise. While jurists may validate it under principles of contractual freedom, participants' lived experiences expose ethical shortcomings and gendered inequities embedded within the practice.

Through the lens of Islamic legal theory, feminist ethics, and critical moral theology, the data demonstrate broader tensions in Muslim societies between tradition and modernity, faith and pragmatism, and law and ethics. Participants' narratives indicate that understanding Misyar requires moving beyond doctrinal legality to engage with the ethical consciousness of believers, shaped by lived experience, social context, and evolving interpretations of religious norms.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the intricate interplay between legal permissibility, moral legitimacy, and socio-cultural realities in the context of Misyar marriage. Drawing on interviews, jurisprudential texts, and feminist critiques, this discussion situates Misyar within wider debates on Islamic law, gender ethics, and social adaptation.

1. Legal Validity versus Moral Legitimacy

Consistent with previous scholarship (Kamali, 2010; Al-Qaradawi, 2007), the study confirms that Misyar marriage is generally recognized as legally valid within Sunni jurisprudence when essential contractual elements are satisfied. Respondents demonstrated awareness of these legal parameters, reflecting a prevailing positivist perspective in contemporary Muslim communities, where law is often interpreted primarily as a set of technical rules rather than as a framework for ethical guidance.

Nevertheless, the data reveal persistent ethical tensions. Women participants reported constrained agency, emotional compromise, and moral unease, echoing Abou El Fadl's (2001) observation that legal permissibility does not automatically confer ethical legitimacy. Although Islamic jurisprudence allows certain marital rights to be waived, the lived experiences of women suggest that such waivers frequently occur under structural pressures, highlighting gender asymmetries embedded in patriarchal interpretations of Shariah.

This divergence between legality and morality illustrates a key theoretical dimension: while Misyar complies with legal requirements, it may not align fully with the *maqasid al-shariah* (higher objectives of Islamic law), which emphasize justice, welfare, and human dignity (Auda, 2008). The findings underscore the distinction between formal legality and ethical validity within Islamic marital practices, reflecting Qur'anic principles of love, mercy, and mutual care (Qur'an 30:21).

2. Gendered Experiences and Feminist Ethical Perspectives

The study highlights gendered disparities in the negotiation and consequences of Misyar. Men often described the practice as a practical arrangement addressing economic or social constraints, whereas women reported emotional vulnerability, social invisibility, and limited bargaining power. These observations reinforce feminist Islamic critiques (Mir-Hosseini, 2003; Wadud, 1999) that patriarchal structures continue to shape marital practices, even when these are religiously sanctioned.

The concept of "negotiated agency" emerged as significant: women's consent, while formally recognized, frequently reflects necessity rather than empowered choice. This indicates that Misyar, as experienced by participants, embodies gendered inequalities, with men retaining marital privileges and women often relinquishing key rights. Ethical assessments, therefore, are influenced by the structural and social contexts in which decisions are made, rather than solely the legal form of consent.

3. Socioeconomic and Cultural Adaptations

Respondents described Misyar as a sociocultural response to contemporary challenges, including migration, labor mobility, financial constraints, and demographic shifts (Al-Fassi, 2016; Yousef, 2015). The arrangement was frequently perceived as a practical solution where conventional marriage was financially or socially burdensome.

This perspective aligns with broader sociological views that Islamic law can function dynamically, adapting to modern social realities. However, the study indicates that such adaptations may simultaneously compromise ethical and relational dimensions of marriage. Practices such as secrecy, temporary arrangements, and social stigma can affect the social recognition of the union and influence the emotional well-being of participants, particularly women.

Misyar Marriage: Islamic Customs, Debates, and Moral Dilemma

4. Ethical Contestation and Theological Reflection

The findings illustrate that Misyar serves as a site of ongoing moral negotiation, where participants, scholars, and religious authorities engage with the tension between legality and morality. Reformist and feminist perspectives emphasize that legal interpretations are intertwined with ethical considerations, including justice, dignity, and compassion (Kamali, 2010; Abou El Fadl, 2001).

Empirical evidence from this study highlights that ethical legitimacy is closely linked to lived experience. The narratives reveal how Islamic societies navigate the intersection of religious law, individual agency, and social norms, reflecting broader tensions between tradition and modernity, and between formal legality and everyday ethical practice.

CONCLUSION OF DISCUSSION

The study reveals that Misyar marriage cannot be comprehensively understood through legal analysis alone. Its practice represents a convergence of legal formality, moral ambiguity, and socio-cultural adaptation. Findings indicate that while Misyar satisfies the contractual requirements of Islamic law, its ethical and social dimensions are complex, shaped by gendered power dynamics, economic considerations, and cultural norms. A holistic approach that incorporates Islamic legal theory, feminist ethics, and moral theology provides a more nuanced understanding of the practice, highlighting the interplay between juridical compliance and ethical legitimacy.

Finding and Conclusion

This research critically examined Misyar marriage as a legally recognized but ethically contested form of Islamic marital arrangement. Utilizing a qualitative methodology that combined interviews, scholarly literature, and jurisprudential analysis, the study underscores the multidimensional character of Misyar. Key findings include:

1. **Legal Validity versus Ethical Legitimacy:** Misyar generally meets the technical criteria of Sunni Islamic law, yet its practice often diverges from the higher objectives of Shariah, including justice, compassion, and human dignity (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Kamali, 2010).
2. **Gendered Dimensions:** Women's participation in Misyar marriages frequently occurs under structural pressures, indicating a discrepancy between formal consent and autonomous choice. Patriarchal norms influence the terms of these marriages, highlighting gendered asymmetries in rights and agency.
3. **Socio-Cultural Adaptation:** The practice functions as a pragmatic response to social, economic, or mobility-related challenges. Nevertheless, secrecy, social stigma, and temporary arrangements can affect both the relational and communal recognition of the marriage.
4. **Ethical Contestation:** Misyar serves as a site of ongoing tension between legal formalism and moral reasoning. Perspectives from feminist and reformist scholarship emphasize that juridical compliance alone does not guarantee ethical or social legitimacy.

Overall, Misyar marriage illustrates the debate between textual adherence and lived ethical realities. While it offers legal and practical flexibility, its uncritical practice may perpetuate gender inequities, emotional vulnerability, and social marginalization, particularly for women and other vulnerable participants.

Misyar marriage provides insight into the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, legal formality and ethical considerations, as well as male authority and female agency within Muslim societies. The findings highlight the importance of approaches that consider both contractual legality and ethical responsibility, emphasizing justice, human dignity, and gender equity. By centering women's experiences and incorporating moral reasoning into discussions of Islamic jurisprudence, communities can better balance flexibility in marital arrangements with ethical and social legitimacy, ensuring that marriage functions as both a legally recognized and morally grounded institution.

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Misyar Marriage: Islamic Customs, Debates, and Moral Dilemma

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Interviews

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