

Feminist Ethnography in South Korea: Documenting Conversion to Islam in “Multicultural” Korea and the Gendered Struggle for Belonging¹

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Abstract

This paper presents a feminist ethnographic account of the gendered struggle for belonging in “multicultural” Korea through an in-depth case study of a Korean Muslim woman convert and her family. Centering the informant and her family’s narratives, I explore the gendered implications linked to her conversion to Islam, her sense of belonging and how her inter-ethnic marriage challenges existing notions of labelled “multicultural families” in Korean society. This paper sheds light on the penalties associated with the case study’s religious conversion and marriage choice, demonstrating how she experiences exclusion from mainstream society and her own ethnic community. Far from being an isolated case, I will further convey how it is linked to several others in the literature, highlighting the urgent need for further field research.

Keywords: Korean Muslims, Korean Women, Multiculturalism, International Marriage, Islamophobia

Introduction

What is “Multicultural” Korea and its concept of a “Multicultural Family?”

Multicultural discourse has a short history in South Korea (henceforth Korea). For over a decade, ongoing debates propose that it has been used to resolve society's social issues: labor shortages, rapid ageing, low birth rate, and a reduction in married couples. These debates frame Korean multiculturalism in several ways. For example, Lee Hye Kyung states that Korean multiculturalism is an exercise from above, pressuring immigrants to assimilate into existing systems rather than accommodating their multifaceted identities.² Both Chang³ and Pirie⁴ link multicultural policies to efforts to control immigration and simultaneous aspirations to become more global. Echoing similar sentiments, Ang argues that multiculturalism has been characterized as a part of Korea's efforts to secure its national boundaries in an era of globalization, therefore in Korea's case, multicultural politics ought to be viewed as part of the national project to manage ethnic diversity.⁵

Korea's framing of its multicultural vision can also be attributed to its experiences of imperialism and colonialism as ethnic nationalism played a pivotal role in its objective to build a strong nation. Naturally, this nationalism came at the expense of those outcast as Others and recent attempts to build a new multicultural discourse can be viewed as a reflection of these historical legacies. In relation to this, Ahn examines the power dynamics laying at the heart of Korean conceptions of multiculturalism, suggesting that it exacerbates and extends existing hierarchal differences between “pure” and “mixed” Koreans, the latter, who are framed as undesirable Others.⁶

As we can see, there are several approaches that attempt to define and frame multiculturalism in Korea. For this paper, the link between multiculturalism and marriage is essential for understanding how inter-ethnic families are produced and shaped in Korean society with particular burdens placed on women. As highlighted by Lee Hye Kyung, women, often from South East or Central Asia have been targeted for marriage immigration through agencies that supply foreign brides to “unmarriageable” Korean men who are often located in remote, rural areas of the country.⁷ These efforts to socially engineer a more “multicultural” society coupled with ongoing discourses propagated from top-down, has led to a series of specific ideas and policies about what multiculturalism “looks like” in the public's imagination, usually through images of low-paid migrant laborers, foreign brides and “multicultural families.” These families are often constructed through marriage between a Korean man and a foreign bride, and

their multi-ethnic children are supported through various integration, language, and lifestyle programmes aiming to shape these women into appropriate “Koreanized” wives. Existing literature reflects the gendered burden placed on immigrant women’s role in producing Korea’s “multicultural” society as they are held as the standard bearers for its global visions. As Ahn highlights, these women are viewed as mothers of the future workforce through their Korean children and as caregivers of Korea’s elderly, particularly male population in the form of husbands. On the other hand, few studies have given attention to the phenomenon of Korean women choosing to marry immigrant men, particularly those from non-western countries.⁸ This paper extends the sparse literature in this area, extending the work of Kwak Yoon Kyung who has highlighted the multi-layered societal penalties faced by Korean women who marry immigrant men, particularly when their husbands originate from developing countries.⁹ My work will take this a step further to show how female conversion to Islam complicates the notion of a multicultural family when led by an ethnically Korean woman.

Pausing briefly to acknowledge the problematic and contentious nature of Korean multicultural politics, it is not my intention to entangle myself in a battle that pits Korean and immigrant women against each other. Instead, I am considering this complex context as a frame to explore what it *means* to be labelled a “multicultural family” led by a Korean Muslim woman, wife, and mother with an immigrant husband. Furthermore, I am interested in exploring how this situation is complicated further when the Korean woman converts to Islam in a society with little awareness or frame of understanding what it means to be a Muslim. How do racialized understandings of what it means to be Muslim and “multicultural” push her to the margins of society, and how does she negotiate her notions of identity and belonging as Korean Muslim woman, wife, and mother in her newfound minority position? I explore these themes in this ethnographic case study, based on two years of observations and interviews with Ayesha.*¹⁰

This research offers several important and meaningful contributions to the field. The regional focus on Korea brings new knowledge about Muslim minority lives to the fore, adding fresh ethnographic perspectives specifically through a feminist lens to the study of Muslims in non-Muslim societies that is often dominated by western narratives. Enriching the field with new categories of knowledge, this study helps to better frame the experiences and struggles of Korean converts to Islam such as Ayesha, demonstrating a societal shift away from Barker’s suggestion that Islam has only made a “toehold” in Korea.¹¹ Thirdly, despite Korea’s small ethnic Muslim population (estimated at 30,000), Korean Muslim perspectives, especially through Ayesha’s case study, offer nuanced, intersectional lenses for which to examine many existing social issues operating in Korean society; particularly

highlighting the intersections between inter-ethnic marriages, women's agency, Islamophobia, colonial legacies, and racism in a society that finds itself needing to rapidly adapt existing systems, policies, and viewpoints to deal with a diversifying population. Furthermore, given the importance placed on the idea of social harmony, coupled with its history of exerting control over women's bodies and sexualities, Korean Muslim conversion, particularly women's conversion to Islam, poses an interesting and complex challenge to deeply embedded notions of what it means to be Korean in contemporary times.

As I will demonstrate through this case study, my informant faced several penalties for choosing Islam, especially as an ethnically Korean woman, in the following ways. Firstly, as a hijab-wearing Korean Muslim woman, she was racialized into existing notions of a "Foreign Other." Secondly, through my informant's negative experiences, we can see how she was framed as a "fallen women" and "cultural traitor" because of her inter-ethnic marriage. Thirdly, as a Korean Muslim woman who is also a mother to multi-ethnic, Muslim children, Ayesha actively implements complex strategies aimed at protecting the family from societal ostracization, often facing intense personal discrimination in the process of child-rearing. Drawing on these main themes emerging from the ground, my feminist-orientated analytical framework examines the intersections of my main informant's identity and experiences as a Korean Muslim woman in "multicultural" Korea.

Methodology

Employing Feminist Ethnographic Methods

Feminism and by extension "feminist" ethnography are terms which are highly contested with long histories of debate and definition. That being said, I clearly identify my work and my methodology as feminist-orientated, whilst fully acknowledging that as a researcher, I am still in process of articulating, deepening, and learning more about my position in relation to feminism and the theories and methods that go hand in hand with this approach. Feminist anthropologists, Dennis et al., highlight the importance of identifying the fundamental values that shape work as "feminist,"¹² and in that line, I state the following feminist ethics and principles for my own ethnographic explorations: first, this case study centers the life, experiences, and struggles of an ethnic Korean Muslim woman with the aim of elevating her voice in the field as a matter of equity and justice. I am mindful of Dubois's proposition that subaltern groups have a "double consciousness" where they do not or cannot fit into dominant categories of knowledge, which is

often produced by dominant groups.¹³ This, given the extreme marginalization of Korean Muslim women's voices across the academy, Korean society and how they are further excluded from public discourse about "multicultural families" despite being actively involved in the creation of such families, raises the importance of contemplating issues of equity, justice, and agency and produce relevant categories of knowledge as significant factors that continue to influence, shape, and inspire my research. In doing so, we can see the connections between the attitudes shaped by Korea's colonial legacies, historical contexts, global aspirations for power and recognition, and the lives of Korean Muslim women such as Ayesha, observing and analyzing how they become entangled in processes that, in the line of Hill Collins, form specific political oppressions.¹⁴

Secondly, as argued by Smith, I recognize the authority of experience, especially in the case of marginalized women's voices as the experts in their own narratives, which they are choosing to share with me, the ethnographer, who should listen and observe through the principles of humility, compassion, and ethical responsibility.¹⁵ Reflective of these values, this study has been largely collaborative, working with Ayesha over several years (2017 ~ ongoing) to confirm experiences were noted and understood correctly, giving her the opportunity to correct and rectify research materials as well as giving her the opportunity to interrogate me in my position as a researcher, British-Pakistani, and fellow Muslim woman. Through this process, my aim was to preserve the integrity of Ayesha's voice as much as possible, whilst acknowledging that there will never be a fully equal power relationship between researcher and informant.

Thirdly, this ethnography is "feminist" in that it has "real-life" value and, therefore, the potential to have "real-life" consequences, which lays a sense of ethical responsibility upon the shoulders of the ethnographer. As a feminist ethnographer, I am acutely aware of the fact that Ayesha chose to open a window into her life, her inner thoughts, and her struggles to me based on our mutual connection as Muslim women. I am acutely aware of her perception that I can deliver her story, and by extension, the stories of Korean Muslims who have been largely neglected in social and academic circles to other experts in the field. In doing so, Ayesha believes that these types of research projects will eventually generate the knowledge needed to facilitate empathy for her personal struggles as a Muslim woman in a society that is, at best, unfamiliar and, at worst, fearful of Islam. These perceptions, hopes, and expectations weigh heavily on my shoulders, and I am mindful that scholars are often perceived as holding more power than is the reality. On the other hand, these field realities continue to fire motivation to implement values of ethical responsibility, compassion, and commitment to elevating these marginalized voices to the center as much as is possible.

Using these ethical principles as the baseline for all my research interactions has meant that I am continually open and honest about my presence in the field. I have always made my position as an ethnographer clear when I have engaged in data collection, particularly when observing or interviewing. As semi-structured interviewing was an important tool for this case study, I obtained informed consent at the beginning of every interview which was voice-recorded, because I found Ayesha was uncomfortable at the thought of signing physical papers. She was far more comfortable with giving her consent as part of our overall interview recording, which I incorporated in all of my subsequent interview interactions. As part of the ethics of openness. I also offered typed versions of the final transcripts for review, copies of the original source recordings, and emphasized her right to withdraw from the project at any time.

Data Collection Processes

Firstly, this is an ongoing ethnographic project, beginning in July 2017. I travelled to Korea for the first time to carry out initial field research on the conversion narratives, identity, and gender issues shaping Korean convert Muslim lives in the context of Korea's aspirations to build an internationally recognized multicultural society. During that early phase of fieldwork of approximately two months, I focused on building relationships with gatekeepers in the field including the imam of Seoul Central Mosque and other elder Muslims in the community, who run Islam study and social groups for new Korean convert Muslims.

It was during this early period of ethnographic fieldwork where I first met Ayesha* a middle-aged Korean Muslim woman, married to a Pakistani man with three young children. Ayesha and I quickly bonded over our mutual Pakistani connections, love of travel, her desire to practice Urdu and English and her general sense of openness towards a fellow Muslim woman. Over the years, Ayesha became one of my main informants, introducing me to other Korean Muslim women, vouching for my "integrity" after her own personal experiences with me.

The ability to build up trust and rapport is essential for any field ethnographer. I learned very quickly that Korean Muslims who use Seoul Central Mosque were often wary of outsiders, because they were often approached with requests to share their stories with broadcasters, missionaries, and journalists from Muslim majority countries. Fascinated by this tiny minority, these visitors were keen to preach their version of Islam or broadcast Korean Muslim conversion stories as "inspiring" content for viewing consumption by Muslim audiences obsessed with *Hallyu* back at home. Often complaining about being targeted or exotified by other Muslims abroad and feeling frustrated by the local academic politics

shaping the domestic Islamic Studies scene, my initial entry as an outsider—a non-Korean Muslim woman researcher into the field was extremely tough. I relied on gatekeepers for the first few months as I worked hard to settle my position in the field.

Eventually, I joined a weekend study and social group, *SN*, aimed at supporting Korean Muslims in their journeys to Islam and adjusting to life in Korean society post conversion. As the group met up every Sunday afternoon at Seoul Central Mosque in Itaewon, I spent my weekends and free time volunteering, participating in events, giving free lectures in the community as part of my efforts to gain acceptance and to show that I was more than willing to give what I could to the community in exchange for their permission of my presence in their spaces and their worlds. As Ayesha was a member of this group and attended most of their events, I had ample opportunity to observe and interact with her in a variety of settings, mostly around the Itaewon area. These Sunday meetings were for eating together, catching up on news, studying Islam, planning, and hosting events through which the group aimed to foster better relations with mainstream Korean society.

Despite initial entry issues, my complex personal positionality: Muslim woman, woman, scholar, non-Korean, British-Pakistani, and fellow Muslim minority influenced my position and the depth of that position in the field. Growing up Muslim in London, a non-Muslim environment meant I had several points of connection with my participants, particularly on negotiations between religious lines when it came to everyday issues like attending after-work drinks, accessing halal food, finding time to pray and fast in a society that was not well-equipped to deal with or accept such practices. My background as a scholar was appreciated as I could lecture and provide resources to new Korean Muslims who were unable to access Islamic books in their native tongues but were comfortable in English. In the end, the fact that I was not Korean and therefore completely disconnected from any of their own internal networks helped participants to feel like they could open up about their lives and their struggles freely, away from the hierarchies of their own networks.

Ayesha and I continued to build rapport and deepen our relationship even after I temporarily returned to England. Promising I would return to continue this work, Ayesha and I kept communicating through the popular, local messaging app, Kakao Talk. This meant that once I returned to Korea for full-time research in 2018, I was able to quickly reactivate many of these early networks, especially so in the case of Ayesha. We met up often and held long hours of conversation where she inquired about my life growing up as a British Pakistani in London. Again, my background was an important point of connection between us as she

saw parallels between my family and upbringing and her own home situation. Concerned about her own Korean-Pakistani children's ability to flourish as minorities in society, I often listened to Ayesha talk about the measures she was trying to employ to ensure her children had all the tools to succeed in South Korea's incredibly competitive educational environment and her other struggles. As Ayesha is fluent in English and was keen to practice her language skills, our interviews were conducted almost exclusively in English with a Korean-English speaking research assistant present for additional translation support, which was rarely necessary. These long, fruitful, rich conversations along with extensive opportunities to observe her in the field since 2017 onwards prompted me to prepare a single ethnographic case study giving us the opportunity to deeply explore Ayesha's unique experiences and struggles as a Korean woman, Muslim, wife, and mother.

Justification for Ethnographic Case Study

As suggested by Eisenhardt, case studies are an appropriate method for research in new areas or where existing theories are lacking.¹⁶ This is particularly relevant for my research areas as there are few opportunities for researchers, especially non-Korean researchers to access the level of deep data presented in this paper, and even fewer opportunities to work with intercultural Muslim married couples in the Korean context. Drawing on the work of Yin, the ethnographic case study method allows us to ask "how" and "why" phenomena unfolds and takes place as it happens in its own context.¹⁷ The single case study presented in this paper reflects several ground truths that need to be explored including the intersections between multicultural and multicultural family production discourse in South Korea, ethnic Korean women's conversions to Islam, and gendered struggles for belonging that result from this major life change. A point to note is that whilst Ayesha features as the main protagonist in this exploration of conversion to Islam in South Korea, her story is interwoven with that of her husband and children, as their existence and connections to Ayesha mark her out as "Other." Additionally, the use of this method also reflects the lack of existing research and a small pool of accessible, appropriate participants in this field of research. Keeping these factors in mind, I believe sharing Ayesha's case as a stand-alone ethnographic case study is worthy of exploration, offering textured analysis that is missing in the wider field of Muslim Minority, Korean, Multiculturalism, and Gender Studies.

Snapshots of Life as a Muslimah in Contemporary South Korea

Summary of Ayesha's background

Over the years, Ayesha and I have had countless hours of interview time where she has shared various fragments of her life with me. In reflection of her journey, which began well over a decade ago when Ayesha was a single woman taking her first steps towards Islam, I have arranged this case study following the milestones of her adult life as she narrated them to me: becoming a Muslim, dating and marriage, establishing a home and family, and her struggles as an ethnically Korean Muslim woman. Ayesha is now in her forties, married to a Pakistani man and together, they have three children. The family lives in a small, suburban community in the international airport city, Incheon. Despite the growing diversity within Incheon, Ayesha and her family remain the only multicultural family in their neighborhood, and as a way of finding community, she is a regular at Incheon Mosque where they hold free Islam classes, social meetings, and programs.

A Seoulite at heart, Ayesha often makes the long journey to Seoul Central Mosque, the place where she first studied Islam and took her shahādah (الشهادة).¹⁸ Here, she meets up with friends old and new, catches up with elder Korean Muslim mentors and participates in volunteer activities aimed at fostering better relations between Korean Muslims and mainstream Korean society. As highlighted by Song, the mosque is strategically located in an area of the capital famous for all things “foreign,” meaning it is a place that is home to many immigrants, foreign supermarkets, and world food restaurants.¹⁹ By coming here, Ayesha is not only keen to expose her children to Islam and other Muslim children but also wants to show them that other mixed ethnicity children like hers exist and live well in Korean society. As we will discover in the upcoming sections, this is an important part of Ayesha's parenting strategies, to instill pride and confidence in her children who are often questioned, cursed, and bullied by others for their multi-layered identities in a society which is still grappling with the idea of multiculturalism and how to foster belonging in an Islamophobic context.

Snapshot: Journey to Islam: Questions, Introspection, and Conversion

I tried to study Islam because I had a lot of questions. Since I was Christian, we had to believe in the Trinity but according to Islam, this can be a big sin. Korean people, we never think that this can be a sin. Many of us do not even know that the Trinity is not in the Bible. I wanted to think about why this could be a big sin and studied about these kinds of things. Eventually, I was able to solve this

issue as my first question. Then, I was curious about why Jesus was not last? I really wanted to know why someone else (Muhammad) came after Jesus! These kinds of questions sparked my curiosity about Islam. Alhumdulillah, since I got my answers, I became a Muslim.²⁰

Ayesha's transition to Islam was a long and slow process as she immersed herself in contemplation across spiritual and temporal realms. The idea of living in "sin," fears for her soul, and an intense desire to please God were some of the main spiritual driving forces behind her decision to become a Muslim. Although born Christian, growing up in a nominally practicing household left her hungry for theological answers to the "big questions" that could shape the future of her eternal life. In the material world, curiosity and a desire to live a life that was different from the norm were other motivations that impacted Ayesha's choices. Young and hungry to get out of Korea to explore the world along with its colorful cultures and varying religions, Ayesha started her journey to Islam as a twenty-something backpacker. She travelled extensively, her experiences in the Middle East and North Africa being most impactful for her religious transformation.

As we talk, Ayesha smiles as she reminisces about her life on the road: a working holiday in Australia, Arabic language school in North Africa, a tour guide for Korean tourists in Egypt, and so on. Each time Ayesha ran out of money, visas or felt homesick, she returned to Korea whilst she planned her next trip. During these visits home and in the comfort of all that is familiar, she talked about how easy it would have been to forget the excitement that comes with new experiences in faraway lands but for Ayesha, Islam had already sparked something deep inside her heart. She described how she would go to Seoul Central Mosque to take advantage of the free Arabic classes on offer along with the chance to study Islam intensely with other Korean friends—all the better because the classes were available in the Korean language. This sense of adventure served Ayesha well, as once she married, she eventually moved to Pakistan to live with her husband and their extended family for several years before returning to Korea.

For now, as we lazed in the women's section of Seoul Central Mosque, a haven for Muslim mothers as they can rest in a space large enough for their children to play together, we reflect upon the Mosque's surroundings in Itaewon. A sprawling, Turkish-style building, Seoul Central Mosque is nestled between a quirky hodgepodge of gay and transgender bars, restaurants serving halal and international cuisines not found elsewhere in the city, hip-hop clubs, US army supply shops, and popular brand stores. Nostalgic, this area evokes memories of Ayesha's pre-Muslim youth, where she would come to this very same area to drink and dance the night away with her girlfriends every Friday night. Ayesha believes

it is tremendously significant that she now prays in the place where she used to play, firm in her faith, believing that this is all part of God's plan for her salvation.

Today, Ayesha is well-networked within the Korean Muslim community. She still attends and participates in events designed to train Korean Muslims in *da'wah* (الدعوة)²¹ skills so that she can challenge her family and friends' prejudices about Islam through negotiation rather than argument. She is also interested in continued personal development through Islamic studies classes available at the various mosques that she frequents and is a staunch friend to fellow Koreans interested in learning more about the religion or are recently converted.

Choosing a Life Partner: Dating, Love, and Marriage

I met him (Qasim*) before I travelled to Australia. First, I travelled to Egypt, Palestine, and Jordan. Then I came back to Korea and studied Arabic at the masjid just like I do these days! At first, I just treated him as a friend. He is an honest man—a good man. During those early days, we were just friends. A few months later, I was preparing to go to Australia and whilst I was there, Qasim called me several times. He also sent letters. I thought he might have left Korea but when I returned after a year, I learned that he was still here. By this point, I thought he was a good man—should I think about him a bit more deeply?²²

As indicated above, in-between her international adventures, Ayesha first met Qasim* on one of her visits to Seoul Central Mosque. At first, the two struck up a friendship, keeping in touch and exchanging friendly letters whilst she was abroad. This quickly changed once Ayesha eventually decided to return home. She learned that despite her long period of absence, Qasim was still in Korea, single and eager to stay in touch. Attracted by his honesty and good manners, Ayesha started to fall in love. By this point, she was already a Muslim struggling with Arabic classes for reading the *Quran*. Looking back on her former self, Ayesha bursts into fits of giggles as she recalls a time when she thought all Muslims carried the same outlook and were all fluent in Arabic, using this as a way to approach her future husband:

I was the one to approach him about Arabic first. Qasim said he can read a bit but not speak because the Pakistani and Arabic languages are similar, so he was honest from the very beginning!

This naive encounter was also Ayesha's first proper window into the diversity that exists within Muslim cultures. Having very few Muslims in Korea coupled with her experiences of Islam that were predominantly shaped by travels in the Middle East, Ayesha was extremely surprised to learn that her future husband could only recite the Arabic *Quran* and needed to rely on translations in his native language—just like her; this helped to strengthen their bond.

Meeting the parents

My parents said: ‘if you want to marry Qasim, you have to think carefully because your baby will not be welcomed in Korea.’ They were already worried about these things but at that time, I didn’t worry about it. I just thought ‘I like this man, he’s very nice.’ My parents were not against us, they were just very worried for us.²³

As we chart Ayesha’s journey through her conversion to Islam and then her marriage choice, we can quickly pinpoint the root of the troubles that still hinder Ayesha and her family’s sense of identity, self, and belonging in multicultural Korea today. As indicated by the interview extract, Ayesha’s parents were largely unconcerned about her choice to date and then marry an immigrant man even though he was a Muslim.

On the contrary, they felt it was fortunate that their daughter, who had now embraced a “foreign” religion with few adherents in Korean society was still able to find love and meet their expectations of marriage with someone who was religiously similar if not culturally very different to them. However, Qasim’s ethnicity was a sticking point with Ayesha’s parents, fearful about the negative social implications that often follow a marriage that produced mixed-heritage children in Korea. Considering Korea’s recent past where mixed heritage children and inter-ethnic marriages were largely condemned or outright rejected, these concerns need further unpacking.

Historically, inter-ethnic marriages were a rare occurrence in Korean society, because it was often associated with imperialist and colonial invasions. As noted by Hye-Kyung Lee, initially, Korean women led intercultural marriage trends in contemporary Korean history. These marriages were met with intense disapproval, with women facing social stigma for choosing to marry a non-Korean, their mixed heritage children oftentimes rejected by society.²⁴ The Korean parent, usually the mother, faced intense scrutiny for “contaminating” the so-called “pure” Korean bloodline, reflecting desires to police female sexuality and in doing so, maintain tight control over the production of “Korean” families. Over time, these marriages have also posed key questions for the conception of Korean identity, challenging existing notions of Korean nationhood, citizenship, and the role of women in society.

The relationship between Korea’s colonial legacy, views on race and ethnic identity, and women’s agency shapes and embeds the underlying negative perceptions towards Ayesha and her family. Especially, her marriage to Qasim brings issues of “*Yanggongju*” (양공주) back to the contemporary fore. As explained by Kim (1998)²⁵ and Kwak, this derogatory term meaning “Yankee Princess” was used to describe Korean women who married US Army personnel, who were

often stationed in camps built in the center of Seoul surrounded by a thriving prostitution industry that catered to them.²⁶

As Park states, these attitudes extended to Korean women who entered inter-ethnic marriages, framing them as traitors who had not only turned their backs on the nation's men but also injured its masculine pride.²⁷ As a way of controlling the production of families who could be considered appropriately "Korean," these unions struggled to achieve formal recognition. The children resulting from these marriages were legally and socially excluded, purposely left unrecognized by the state, with many sent to America as part of a state-sponsored adoption program.²⁸

To summarize, as highlighted by Park, Korean women who married non-Korean men were viewed as an extension of the nation's failure to defend itself against invaders and drew battlegrounds for patriarchal-nationalist ideologies on the bodies of Korean women. If we now reconsider the fear that Ayesha and Qasim's baby would be "unwelcome" in Korean society, we can see that, on the surface, it may be easy to dismiss the rejection as expressions of xenophobia or even fear of the unknown. However, unlike in many western or other eastern contexts where people of differing backgrounds have found ways to live together, marry, and no matter how imperfect, generally negotiate some sense of belonging under various notions of multiculturalism, this, as a political and social concept, is yet to be widely embraced as a way of being in Korean society.

It must be acknowledged that contemporary Korea is certainly making rapid progress as societal demographics evolve and change. Despite this, the notion of multiculturalism, as it is more commonly understood in places like Europe or North America, is a long way off with older identity concepts tying Koreanness to blood, ancestry, and birthplace still very much in motion. Ayesha's parents' concerns can be viewed as a contemporary reflection of this socio-political reality, therefore, the fear that Ayesha and Qasim's baby "will not be welcome in Korea" becomes symbolic of historical burdens placed by colonial legacies on the bodies of Korean women like Ayesha, who choose to live alternate lives.

Experiencing Trials in Korean Society: Starting a Multicultural Family

Some young kids started hitting my son in the playground in front of their grandmother. She ignored the situation until my son got angry and retaliated. Shouting, the grandmother grabbed my son's collar and hurt him. I tried to stop her, but she punched me in the stomach with her other hand; can you believe it?! As I tried to free my son, she grabbed me, too. An old man passing by reported us for attacking the old woman. Since there was no CCTV or witnesses to support our side of the story, we had to attend a court hearing where it was

decided both parties were responsible, and we paid a fine. I was incensed and tried to fight that fine three times, but they would not listen. All this just because I wear a hijab! Korean people never act like this with normal Korean neighbors. They do it to me, because they think I'm a foreigner and look down on me. Korean people think families like ours are poor and lower status compared to them, so they ignore us. That grandmother could NEVER hit me if I looked like a normal neighbor—a 'normal' Korean.²⁹

The concerns expressed by Ayesha's parents quickly materialized into reality once the couple married and started to raise a family. As indicated by the extract, Ayesha's multicultural family often faces hardship as neighbors look down on them, these unfortunate struggles trickling down to her children, reminiscent of the exclusion and rejection suffered by earlier generations of inter-ethnic Korean families. Ayesha also shared their difficulties in finding a safe place to live. As the couple tried to build a home together, they often struggled to find a landlord willing to rent to an inter-ethnic couple. If they were able to overcome this hurdle, the next issue came in the form of racist and Islamophobic neighbors, vehemently against the idea of having an intercultural, particularly Muslim, couple living in their neighborhood.

The very nature of this discrimination and sometimes outright rejection itself are important to highlight, since it was often gendered, aimed at Ayesha who inadvertently highlighted her household's Muslim identity through her choice to wear a hijab. As indicated in the extract, we can see how Ayesha and her young son experienced violence not only from kids in the playground but also from elders who were supposed to watch over them. This, and many other similar incidents, feeds Ayesha's perception that she is singled out in this way because of her visibly Muslim appearance, further reflecting deep-rooted anxieties about mixed heritage families stemming from Korea's colonial legacy.

This is a particularly poignant interview session. Emotions running high, Ayesha is clearly aware of the process of racialization taking place, which casts her outside of the fold of her ethnic community, binding her to prejudices surrounding foreign nationals, Islamophobic sentiments, and racism. This process of racialization is also entwined with gender politics as her status as a "normal Korean" is challenged not only through her religious identity but also through her husband's ethnicity. This is in line with findings from research on converts to Islam in minority contexts including Britain and the United States, indicating connections between global narratives of Islamophobia that are in operation, particularly when women take on visible markers of their new religious identities.³⁰ To elaborate further, in the Korean context, discrimination takes on a local shape, framing Ayesha as either the "fallen" Korean woman in her neighborhood or

the woman who has transformed into someone “foreign” through her marriage choice, her mixed-heritage children, her visible headscarf, and commitment to Islam.

Ayesha is not an isolated case, echoing findings by Kwak proposing that Korean women who enter inter-ethnic marriages, particularly with men from developing countries, also recall the issue of *yanggongju*. My study takes the argument a step further, highlighting how gendered issues of *yanggongju* can go hand-in-hand with Islamophobic and racist sentiments, which targeted Ayesha as an “abnormal” Korean woman. Neighbors regularly used Ayesha’s outwardly Muslim appearance as a way to exclude her family, accusing her of being a member of the terrorist group, ISIS. These unfounded accusations haunted the couple’s movements, and they were forced to move from place to place as they tried to evade harassment.

Here, we can see how Korean women like Ayesha continue to be held up as reproducers of the nation with patriarchal systems attempting to regulate their bodies as “metaphors for their uncontaminated, uninterrupted homo-national identity, imposing on women the ideology of chastity and self-censorship.”³¹ The snapshots presented in this research clearly depict the ways in which Ayesha is continually excluded from her ethnic community. These multi-layered discriminations: sexism, Islamophobia, racism, and so on intersect to not only create a storm of challenges to Ayesha’s sense of belonging to Korean society but also to her own religious identity—which she slowly begins to mediate as part of her efforts to “survive” in Korean society.

Snapshot: Mediating Muslim Life as a Way of Avoiding Exclusion—Mothering and the Hijab

‘She is Korean, why is she wearing clothes like that? It is fine for foreigners but not for Koreans.’ I feel it is an issue for Korean people when they see someone is different to them. It is not just about the abaya or hijab, even if I wear hanbok and walk around in my local area, everyone will stare. If someone does not belong to that local idea or culture, they think: ‘Oh, that person is a bit different’ and that there is no need to be friendly with people who are an ‘exception.’³²

This narration is of particular significance, because it indicates there may be a difference in the standards of “acceptable” behavior for Koreans versus immigrants. Ayesha, along with many other Korean Muslim women in my field often complain that their compatriots are accepting of immigrant Muslim women and their garb but display open hostility towards them for adopting similar styles, because it becomes a distinctive marker of their “foreignness.”

Exhausted by constantly defending her choices and her Koreanness, Ayesha consciously implements various strategies in attempts to evade the label of

“foreigner” for herself and her children. In doing so, Ayesha experiments both with her appearance and often relaxes religious rules for her children, principally at school where they have no halal or vegetarian school lunch options. Sensitive to the fact that they are regularly excluded from friendships and extra-curricular activities, Ayesha attempts to create other opportunities for them to mix with others, particularly through food. It is a source of personal pain that she permits her children to eat non-halal meats (except pork) with school friends or on school trips. As a mother, Ayesha states she does this to minimize the risk of being “too different” on her children, deeply concerned that her family are already problematically labelled as “multicultural,” and that this “stigma” places her loved ones in a weak and vulnerable position in society. To try to level out the playing field, she attempts various approaches to mediate the impact of her family’s vulnerabilities, terrified that her children could become potential victims of Korea’s culture of school violence and teen suicide.³³

As indicated, Ayesha loosens some religious rules, particularly around the consumption of halal food, allowing her children to build relationships with others through eating and socializing as a key part of Korean culture that she wishes to impart to her children for their future survival. She worries that her once they grow up, her children will not be able to cope with the demands of “team building” company dinners once they start working—infamous for late nights, heavy drinking, and pork-based snacks. Ayesha runs a tightrope, attempting to manage a delicate balancing act between belonging, social acceptance—raising children secure in their Korean-Pakistani Muslim identities in an environment that is overtly exclusionary. In summary, in the pursuit of belonging, Ayesha is doing her best to minimize the social penalties attached to their Muslim identities.

This time, when we moved to Incheon, I tried to replace my hijab with a cap and long, loose clothes to be less obvious. It did not work, people kept asking me why I was always wearing a cap! Some even went as far as to ask me about my loose clothes. At that point, I just gave up, and told them that the reason I wear these types of clothes is because I am Muslim, and I am hiding my good-looking figure!!³⁴

Ayesha proudly wears a hijab, believing it is a sign of her personal devotion to God and that it is an important part of her identity as a Korean and Muslim woman. This comes at a heavy price as the hijab distinguishes Ayesha as different, often soliciting unwanted scrutiny from fellow Koreans who cannot understand her choices. As noted in the snapshots above, feeling under pressure, Ayesha experiments with a range of looks, styles, and has, on particularly difficult occasions, considered removing her hijab altogether as some of her fellow Korean Muslim sisters have done.

However, having already given up on the face veil (niqab) for the safety of her children's future, she is loath to give up on the hijab too. Concerned about her children's ability to thrive in society, she tries to style herself closely to what she perceives as a "normal" Korean. This decision is directly related to her role as a mother of mixed ethnicity children who attend a local Korean school. Once again concerned about the way that her family is connected to multicultural politics, Ayesha is passionate about her children developing resilience and survival skills needed to thrive in society once they come of age. For this reason, she insisted on enrolling them into a local over international school where the children's differences would have been accepted more easily. However, unexpectedly for Ayesha, this decision came as a personal cost to her own sense of Muslim womanhood:

I decided that if I come back to Korea and let my kids' study in a local school, in a local area, it's better to be without niqab. I will try to wear it again when my kids grow up. You do not know how difficult it is to make such a decision. I used to be very strict. Over time, little-by-little, I am going easier on myself and letting things go. Is anything left? I do not know if I am doing well or not, but I now have multicultural kids in Korea. Perhaps if I sent them to an international school, I would not have to do these types of things ... But if I want to live with local Koreans, I must try and follow their local rules and customs. Otherwise, my kids are excluded. It is so hard to talk about this. It's very hard for me.³⁵

The gendered expectations of mothering in Korea weigh heavily on Ayesha's shoulders and she now mediates her religious practices through the realities of her everyday life as Korean Muslim, mother, wife, and woman. Highlighting the intense load that comes with mothering, Ayesha's case reflects earlier work conducted by Ruddick who proposed mothers are required to exert considerable mental efforts and thinking practices whilst nurturing and protecting their children.³⁶

The issue of protection is a serious issue for Ayesha. As Collins found that African-American mothers constantly found themselves negotiating power structures not only to foster individual and collective identities but also to instill survival instincts in their children.³⁷ As echoed, throughout this case study, Ayesha is constantly concerned for her children's safety, conscious that they are often bullied because of their hijab-wearing mother and dark-skinned, immigrant father. Additionally, Ayesha needs to fit into the network of local mothers who are shepherding their children through the various private academies, tutors, and activities in the hope that it will give them an edge in Korea's incredibly competitive university and work environment. These events often take place informally, and whilst they are not compulsory, Ayesha feels this is an essential part of her mothering role in Korean society, therefore, she must filter her appearance and

religious needs when taking part in these gatherings. In the face of what she perceives as essential activities for her children's future success, Ayesha struggles to balance her own desire to practice Islam. To instill value into her children for their individual and collective identities, she often feels compromised in her own faith whilst simultaneously asserting space for herself and her loved ones in Korean society.

Conclusions

This ethnographic case study centers the narratives of Ayesha and her family through a feminist ethnographer's perspective. It challenges existing discourses of Korean multiculturalism by exploring the intersections of Ayesha's religious, gender, and ethnic identities and considers how they relate to her sense of belonging to multicultural Korea. In doing so, this case study highlights many gaps in the existing discourse, particularly how Ayesha's religious identity is posed against her ethnic identity, revealing the lack of consideration for the way the two interact to produce alternate forms of Koreanness. Significantly, this work highlights the gender imbalance that continues to hold women like Ayesha responsible for the propagation of families deemed appropriately "Korean." Despite projecting a globalized image that purportedly welcomes diversity, the snapshots presented in this paper evidence how expectations for Korean women shaped by colonial legacies continue to be heaped upon the shoulders of women like Ayesha. Framed as a violator of the nation's patriarchal boundaries through her choice to live an alternate life, we can see how her journey to Islam, dress choices, marriage and family contribute to a series of racializations that eventually force her to the margins of society as Ayesha and her family are absorbed into Korea's "multicultural" landscape.

Despite the troubling snapshots discussed in this paper, Ayesha maintains her position as a Korean Muslim woman shaping that identity in her own unique ways. Far from lacking agency, through the story of her conversion, we see how Ayesha explores profound questions that felt personally significant to her spiritual and material life, taking her on a journey that eventually led to a major shift in her identity. At the same time, Ayesha found her choices and freedom of expression constantly challenged by those assuming converting to Islam was a condition of her marriage to a Pakistani man or that she was a potential terrorist threat, or a danger to her children's successful future, which eventually led her to mediate her Muslimness in public as a way to "survive."

Findings from this case study suggest that patriarchal, sexist, and racist attitudes in Korean society continue to push women like Ayesha to the fringes of society for going against the grain of established societal norms. Ayesha's

experiences of violence, discrimination, and exclusion are significant indicators of the negative consequences attached to Korean women's conversion to Islam as well as their marriage choices. Moreover, negative perceptions attached to markers of religious adherence such as the hijab contribute to the loss of mainstream positionality as Korean women are re-framed as "foreign," "fallen," or cultural "traitors." Despite being excluded by her own ethnic community, Ayesha displays fortitude and resilience as she is determined to remain in a "local" area, educate her children in a regular Korean school and take part in motherly activities that she deems appropriate for a Korean mother concerned for her children's future. Through these thoughts and actions, we can see how Ayesha holds on to her sense of Koreanness and belonging.

Furthermore, Korean women-led marriages throw up different challenges for society and demand that we consider Korean multiculturalism in more complex ways. Unlike married migrant women new to Korean society, women like Ayesha are already familiar with local customs, systems, and the language; therefore, they require very different support services for their families. However, little is available as multicultural discourses are mostly targeted at Korean male-led marriages. A clear example of this is the lack of integration and support services targeting migrant husbands married to Korean wives, Muslim or otherwise. This neglect further illuminates the burden that Korean women like Ayesha face as their bodies become metaphors for patriarchal and nationalist ideals, indicating that they continue to "carry the burden of cultural norms that provide severe penalties for marriage outside their ethnic group."

To conclude, findings from this ethnographic case study reveal how Ayesha's conversion to Islam and her choices connected to it can be linked to several deep-seated issues that lie at the core of Korean society. Its framing of multiculturalism, Islamophobia, nationalism, and patriarchy shapes negative images of Korean women, particularly Korean Muslim women who marry immigrant men from developing countries. Through this, undesirable historical narratives of *yanggongju* and policing Korean female sexuality through the rejection of their marriage choices and children are reignited, this time manifesting through exclusion and discrimination in everyday life.

Despite facing several identity penalties Ayesha is not a passive agent who simply suffers through the trials of life. Instead, through her account of struggle, conversion, marriage, and discrimination, we can clearly see how Ayesha is actively re-working notions of Korean identity concepts, forging her own way to belong. In doing so, she carves out space for herself and her family and helps to establish Islam as a "Korean" religion not only through practice but also by her very existence in society as a Korean Muslim.

Notes

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7. Hye-K'young Lee. "International marriage and the state in South Korea: Focusing on Governmental Policy."
8. See: Hyesil Jung. "P'ak'isüt'an ijunodongjawa kyörhonhan han'gugyösöngüi chuch'esöngge kwanhan yön'gu: p'ak'isüt'an k'öp'ülmoimül chungsimüro." Master's thesis, Seoul, Sungshin Women's University, 2007; Kim, Yiseon, Chu, Yoosun Ju, and Meihua. Fang. "The Blind Spot of the Multicultural Family Support Policy." Seoul: Korean Women's Development Institute, 2012; Yoon Kyung Kwak. "Pushing Away From Their Own nation? South Korean Women Married to Migrant Husbands from Developing Countries." *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42.7 (2019): 1186–1203.
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18. Shahādah is the Islamic testimony of faith: "There is no god but God, and Muḥammad is the Apostle of God." By professing shahādah, one is declaring themselves as Muslim who follows the religion of Islam.
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22. Interview with author (July 2017).
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