

The Taste of Thirst: Symbolic Desire, Marriage, and Irregular Migration of Sri Lankan Women to Italy

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Abstract

This article explores the sociological dynamics of irregular women's migration from Sri Lanka to Italy through deceptive, marriage-based strategies. It investigates how Sri Lankans use marriage as a tool for irregular migration and examines the challenges they face in settlement and adaptation. The study draws on in-depth interviews with 20 undocumented Sri Lankan migrants living in Rome, Milan, and Naples, with four cases (three women and one man) analyzed in detail. Theoretical insights are drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of taste, habitus, and symbolic capital; Jean Baudrillard's notions of simulation and hyperreality; and Julia O'Connell Davidson's theory of symbolic coercion. These frameworks illuminate how the desire for symbolic and material mobility is shaped by fantasies of modernity and emotional scarcity. The article challenges simplified narratives of trafficking and irregular migration, showing how marriage functions as a strategic and performative act that blurs the boundaries between consent and coercion, romance and transaction. The migrants' own use of the term "thirst" captures the symbolic, gendered, and emotional intensity of their aspirations. By revealing the interplay of illusion, survival, and strategy, this study contributes to broader debates on irregular migration, gendered desire, and the moral complexities of legality.

Keywords: irregular migration, symbolic capital, marriage strategies, human trafficking, symbolic coercion, taste

Introduction

On a cold winter morning in Rome in 2023, a 65-year-old Sri Lankan woman named Beatrice walked into the Sri Lankan Embassy. With tears in her eyes, she complained that the Rome '*Commune*' (police station) had denied her pension on the grounds that she was married, despite her official Sri Lankan documents declaring her as unmarried. "Sir, I have a big problem. I came from Sri Lanka a long time ago. Now I'm a citizen here, but they rejected my pension application. They say I am married and need husband's signature for his consent or if he is not alive, his death certificate but I have never been married," she said, pleading for an embassy letter confirming her single status. Upon receiving this complaint, the counsellor in the Embassy began an investigation. It was confirmed that multiple written requests had been sent to Sri Lanka regarding her status, but no responses had been received. Tracing her records proved difficult, as she had left the country in 1982. Eventually, Italian authorities produced documentation showing that Beatrice had once submitted a marriage certificate, which legally registered her as married.

This encounter became the starting point for this paper and the research on migration pathway informally known among Sri Lankans as "the way of marriage." Over the past four decades, this route has enabled hundreds of Sri Lankans particularly women, to enter Italy using forged or symbolic marriage documents. While Pathirage (2025) highlights how migrants employ social capital and community networks to navigate such routes, I argue that these practices constitute a covert form of human trafficking masked as legitimate migration. Despite the illegality of their entry, many of these migrants eventually succeed in regularizing their status, obtaining residence permits or even citizenship.

This article examines the central research question of how Sri Lankans employ marriage-based strategies to migrate illegally to Italy and the challenges they face in the process of

settlement. The study pursues two key objectives: (1) to examine the role of brokers and intermediaries in facilitating marriage-based migration and the benefits they derive, and (2) to explore how migrants reconstruct their lives and identities within Italian society after legal regularization. Based on purposive sampling, the study draws on the experiences of twenty undocumented Sri Lankan migrants residing in Rome, Milan, and Naples. In-depth interviews were conducted with all twenty participants, of whom four were selected for detailed case studies. Four others served as key informants. Fieldwork took place between June and December 2023 and involved home visits and participant observation, some interviews were facilitated through community networks, while others emerged through personal encounters and fieldwork. with follow-up conversations conducted via WhatsApp in early 2024 to complete data collection.

By situating these intimate life stories within broader sociological frameworks, this study interprets the “way of marriage” through Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984 and 1990) concepts of ‘habitus and symbolic capital,’ Jean Baudrillard’s (1994) concept of ‘notion of hyperreality’ and Julia O’Connell Davidson’s (2013 and 2005) analyses of symbolic coercion and trafficking. Together, these theoretical perspectives reveal how personal desire, gendered vulnerability, and global inequality converge to produce a simulated moral legitimacy, a façade of marriage that conceals deeper structures of social coercion. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how Sri Lankan migrants’ pursuit of dignity and belonging transforms marriage into a complex site simultaneously marked by resistance and exploitation.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a centralized approach, emphasizing Bourdieu’s cultural sociology and Baudrillard’s postmodern concepts, while drawing on O’Connell Davidson’s theory to further explain the dynamics of consent and coercion.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990) provides insight into how migration is used as a strategy to convert economic, social, and cultural capital into symbolic capital. Women leverage sexuality, kinship, and gendered roles to perform legitimacy across both Sri Lankan and Italian contexts. Their aspirations are shaped by a habitus embedded in neoliberal economic pressures, consumerism, and shifting gender norms. Through Bourdieu, the case studies demonstrate how symbolic and social capital are strategically mobilized to achieve mobility, even under precarious conditions. Jean Baudrillard (1994) complements this analysis by emphasizing how Italy is imagined prior to being experienced. Migration, in this sense, is directed toward a symbolic construct—of modernity, pleasure, and prestige—circulated through gossip, social media, and remittances. Marriage functions as a staged legal fiction, a performance that facilitates symbolic access to Europe rather than romantic commitment. O’Connell Davidson (2013, 2015) offers a framework for understanding symbolic coercion, illustrating how consent and agency are mediated by structural inequalities. Although women such as Beatrice and Deena appear to act voluntarily, their decisions are shaped by manipulative networks, gendered limitations, and deceptive practices that mimic legality.

By integrating these theories, the article consistently links ethnographic evidence to conceptual frameworks, demonstrating how symbolic capital, habitus, and hyperreality interact with gendered migration strategies.

A Brief Overview of Global and Sri Lankan Migration History

Migration has long shaped human societies across regions and civilizations. Patrick Manning (2020) emphasizes that the “global historical turn” recognizes human mobility as a key force in societal transformation. Although difficult to trace precisely, migration has influenced labor markets, social structures, and cultural exchanges for centuries. Mishra (2020) highlights

that the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a dramatic rise in transnational and intercontinental movement. Often described as the “century of men on the move,” this era saw mass flows driven by industrialization, colonialism, and global labor demand. Between 1850 and 1914, approximately 10% of the global population migrated internationally (World Bank), compared to only about 3% today. The number of international migrants rose sharply in recent decades—from 99 million in 1980 to 190 million in 2005 (United Nations, 2007). By 2005, women accounted for 49.6% of all international migrants (United Nations, 2007; Siddiqui, 2008), reflecting the gendered nature of migration.

Andrey Volodin (2022), in *South Asian Migration to Western Europe: Origins and Trends*, notes that until the early 1990s, South Asians primarily migrated to former colonial powers, especially the United Kingdom. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, migration patterns diversified: while 50% of Indian migrants went to the UK, 18% to Germany, and 12% to Italy. Smaller communities also formed in Belgium, Sweden, and France. In France, for instance, approximately 1,000 Indian migrants arrived annually, with the community reaching 65,000 by the mid-2000s—many from Madagascar, Seychelles, Réunion, and Mauritius.

In Sri Lanka, female labor migration intensified following the economic liberalization of 1977. Open-market reforms expanded opportunities for international mobility, and by the early 1980s, women comprised the majority of outbound migrant workers. Between 1993 and 1997, women constituted nearly 75% of labor migrants, primarily engaged in domestic work in the Middle East. By 2014, domestic work still represented around 80% of female departures, though numbers declined after 2008 due to policies discouraging low-skilled migration while promoting skilled migration with better protections (Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2016).

Pathirage (2011) notes that nearly two million Sri Lankans now live abroad, most of whom are registered with the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE). However, many irregular migrants in Europe and North America are unrecorded in official statistics (UNHCR, 2007). Early Sri Lankan migration to Europe included Vatican pilgrimage visas, which gradually evolved into marriage-based and symbolic entry strategies. Jayawardena (2020) estimates that about three million Sri Lankans now live abroad, including one million permanent settlers—500,000 in the Americas, 400,000 in Europe, and 70,000 in Australasia. Irregular migration has long involved forged documents, altered photographs, and unsafe travel. Today, marriage-based routes and high payments to brokers have become common. Pathirage and Collyer (2011) demonstrates that family and social networks function as migration capital, providing access to housing, jobs, and legal assistance. These networks institutionalize irregular migration as a community-based strategy. Later, Pathirage (forthcoming) argues that such networks also reshape intimacy and family life, often generating moral and religious anxieties within the diaspora.

Migration from Sri Lanka, particularly of women, must therefore be understood as both a structural and symbolic process. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital, these women strategically convert social, cultural, and familial capital into symbolic capital to navigate Italy's legal and social systems. Meanwhile, O'Connell Davidson's (2010) concept of symbolic coercion explains how structural inequality, gendered expectations, and brokered networks create conditions where consent is shaped by limited options—disguising coercion as choice. Together, these frameworks illuminate the complex interplay between aspiration, agency, and vulnerability in Sri Lankan women's migration.

Taste, Illusion, and Reality

Across the life narratives of Sri Lankan women who migrated to Italy through the so-called “way of marriage” routes, each story reveals a distinctive blend of emotional, familial, and strategic motivations. Taken together, however, these narratives point to a shared social and symbolic pattern: the journey from rural Sri Lanka to Italy is not merely a strategy for survival, but a deeply symbolic pursuit of social legitimacy, dignity, and modernity, shaped by imagination, performance, and calculated choices. The following case studies explore these women’s experiences in their own voices—stories that blend hope and hardship, love and illusion, mobility and constraint. Each narrative reflects how global structures of inequality intersect with personal aspirations, highlighting the tension between symbolic desire and lived reality.

Case Study 1: Beatrice Anne Mary

I met Beatrice in 2023 in Milan. She is a 65-year-old Roman Catholic woman who grew up in a middle-class family in Colombo, describing her childhood as marked by both affection and constraint. “I always felt I needed to prove myself,” she recalls, reflecting on the pressure to meet family expectations while navigating a changing social landscape. Following Sri Lanka’s 1977 economic reforms, new consumer goods, urban lifestyles, and aspirations for global mobility became powerful symbols of social status among youth. Beatrice internalized these aspirations, shaping her habitus, her dispositions, tastes, and expectations toward a life beyond Sri Lanka.

At the age of 24, she decided to migrate to Italy through a marriage arrangement. “It was not just about the money; it was about being seen differently, about having a life people would admire,” she explains. Her decision combined practical strategy with symbolic desire, the pursuit of social and cultural capital. She relied on brokers who connected her to Italian men seeking

marriages of convenience. Through this network, she converted her social and familial knowledge into opportunities abroad, negotiating symbolic value in the marriage market.

In Italy, Beatrice encountered both opportunity and constraint. Although her marriage granted her legal residence, she soon realized that her autonomy was shaped by structural conditions—dependence on her husband, brokers, and social expectations within the diaspora. She navigated these dynamics with strategic compliance, maximizing her symbolic capital to access education, employment, and social recognition. Yet the arrangement carried subtle forms of coercion: the constant pressure to maintain appearances and fulfil obligations within an unequal system.

From a theoretical perspective, Bourdieu's notion of habitus and capital explains how Beatrice's socialized dispositions and learned strategies enabled her to maneuver within these structures (1984, pp. 6–8; 1990, pp. 52–55). O'Connell Davidson's concept of symbolic coercion clarifies how a seemingly consensual marriage was shaped by social and economic pressures that limited genuine choice. Together, these concepts illuminate the delicate interplay between agency and structural constraint in Beatrice's migration experience (2005, pp. 14–18).

Beatrice's migration through a marriage arrangement illustrates how individual agency is exercised *within*, rather than outside of, structural constraints. Her decision was neither purely coerced nor fully autonomous; instead, it emerged from a historically specific configuration of class aspirations, gendered expectations, and global inequalities shaped by Sri Lanka's post-1977 socio-economic transformations. Through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital, Beatrice's actions can be understood as strategic maneuvers informed by deeply internalized dispositions that oriented her toward social mobility and symbolic recognition beyond the national context. At the same time, O'Connell Davidson's notion of symbolic coercion reveals how these strategies

operated within unequal power relations that limited the range of genuinely available choices, particularly in the marriage-migration nexus. This case, therefore, challenges simplistic binaries of victimhood and choice in migration studies, demonstrating instead how consent, desire, and constraint are intertwined. Beatrice's experience underscores the need to conceptualize marriage migration as a socially embedded process in which gendered agency is negotiated through, and often compromised by, structural inequalities operating across local and global scales.

Beatrice's migration illustrates how agency is exercised within structural constraints rather than outside them. Her decision to move abroad reflected both practical strategy and the pursuit of social recognition, shaped by internalized dispositions and aspirations cultivated in a transforming social and economic landscape. While she navigated opportunities for education, employment, and social visibility, her autonomy remained intertwined with familial, marital, and community expectations. By strategically negotiating these constraints, Beatrice converted her social knowledge and symbolic resources into tangible and symbolic forms of mobility. Her story highlights how marriage migration operates as a socially embedded process, where desire, consent, and structural limitations are continuously intertwined, and where the pursuit of recognition is as much symbolic as it is practical.

Case Study 2: Deepa Geethanjani (Deena)

I met Deena at the end of 2023 in Naples. She is a 45-year-old mother of three who migrated to Milan in 2005 "by way of marriage," notably without paying brokers. Her journey began through a love affair developed on Facebook with a factory worker in Milan, driven largely by her desire to go to Italy.

Deena grew up in a semi-urban area of Sri Lanka, where opportunities for young women were limited. From early adolescence, she was drawn to nightlife and urban social spaces, seeking

excitement and social recognition. “I wanted to live a life that felt free, visible, and important,” she recalls. This aspiration reflects a habitus shaped by exposure to media, urban consumption, and peer networks, illustrating Bourdieu’s idea of dispositions cultivated through social context.

At the age of 22, Deena entered the migration circuit through informal brokers who connected young women with Italian men seeking marriages of convenience. The decision was strategic: it combined the pursuit of symbolic capital with practical migration goals. “I knew it wasn’t just about love; it was about positioning myself in a world I could control,” she explains. Her story highlights how young women negotiate social expectations, personal desire, and structural opportunities within irregular migration networks.

In Italy, Deena navigated complex social and gendered hierarchies. While the marriage facilitated legal residence, it also imposed constraints and obligations. She engaged in social performance, maintaining appearances, fulfilling her marital role, and cultivating relationships within the migrant community to maximize her symbolic capital. Her narrative reflects a form of agency exercised within structural limitations, where autonomy is intertwined with dependency on brokers, husbands, and social norms. Deena’s experience also reveals the subtle coercion embedded in irregular migration. While she exercised choice in pursuing the marriage, structural pressures, including economic necessity, social expectations, and broker-mediated networks shaped her options. concept of symbolic coercion clarifies how migration strategies, even when formally voluntary, are embedded in broader patterns of constraint and obligation (O’Connell Davidson, 2013, pp. 176–195).

Deena’s habitus and accumulation of social and cultural capital enabled her to navigate these dynamics, while the concept of notion of hyperreality sheds light on the symbolic allure of migration, nightlife, and transnational status(Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 23–28). Her fascination with

“Little Rome,” Facebook profiles, remittance-funded houses, and images of wealth created a hyperreal Italy that existed more in imagination than in material reality. Her marriages functioned as symbolic passages into this imagined world, blending care, sexuality, and survival.

Deena’s migration journey shows how aspiration, imagination, and structural pressures intersect in shaping marriage migration. Her pursuit of visibility, freedom, and social recognition was guided by dispositions cultivated through media, urban networks, and peer influences. While she exercised choice in entering marriage arrangements, her options were shaped by economic necessity, social expectations, and broker-mediated networks. By performing relational and social strategies, she negotiated a constrained form of agency that balanced personal ambition with survival. Her story highlights how migration operates as both a symbolic and material project, where imagined opportunities and hyperreal ideals drive action alongside real-world constraints, and where the negotiation of autonomy and dependency defines everyday migrant life.

Case Study 3: Anjaleena Dabare (Aeen)

I met Aeen at the end of 2023 in Naples. She was a 45-year-old mother of three who had migrated to Milan in 2005 “by way of marriage,” notably without paying brokers. Her journey began through a love affair on Facebook with a factory worker in Milan, driven by her desire to go to Italy.

Aeen grew up in a semi-urban area of Sri Lanka, where opportunities for women were limited. Her aspirations were shaped by images of wealth and modernity. Visiting her friend Mary in Nattandiya, she saw “massive houses everywhere—palaces, not homes...cars and jeeps shining like ships.” Mary explained that families had migrated to Italy through visas, fake documents, or marriages. For Aeen, Italy became a “thirst”—a symbolic desire for recognition, dignity, and a transformed life.

Determined to reach Italy, she sent friend requests to several men on Facebook. Christy, a factory worker in Milan, responded. Despite his ordinary appearance, Aeen agreed to marry him. She recalls, “I just wanted to go to Italy...he was my ticket to that dream.” In Milan, they lived together for two years and had a child, while Aeen sent money home to support her parents and younger sister. Realizing Christy could not fulfill her larger dreams, she moved on. In Rome, she met Anthony, who ran an illegal money transfer business. Aeen became his mistress, had another child, and started a small lending business serving Sri Lankan families.

When Anthony was imprisoned, she lost everything. Eventually, she moved to Naples with Jayasena, a widower running a hotel. They now live together with their son. Despite the hardships, Aeen remains determined: “One day, I’ll build the biggest house in Sri Lanka...Until then, I’ll continue to enjoy this Italian thirst.”

Aeen’s story illustrates how migration intertwines with symbolic aspiration. Bourdieu’s concept of taste (1984) explains her fascination with “Little Rome”—a landscape of wealth, modernity, and prestige displayed through houses, gardens, and cars. Her migration is not purely economic; it reflects a pursuit of social recognition, aesthetic transformation, and upward mobility.

Baudrillard’s notion of simulation (1994) shows how her dream was constructed from Facebook profiles, remittance-funded houses, and imagined wealth. Her marriages and relationships acted as symbolic passages into this hyperreal Italy, blending desire, survival, and performance. O’Connell Davidson’s (2005) concept of symbolic coercion clarifies how her choices, though seemingly voluntary, were shaped by social pressures, brokered networks, and structural inequalities. Aeen’s narrative captures how women negotiate agency, desire, and constraint—using their bodies, relationships, and social networks as tools to navigate structural limitations while pursuing dignity, beauty, and recognition. Her repeated reference to “thirst”

embodies a longing that is emotional, symbolic, and transformative, reflecting both personal ambition and structural constraint.

Aeen's migration journey demonstrates that marriage migration is not a single event but an ongoing process shaped by desire, loss, and reinvention. Her repeated movement through intimate relationships reflects a deeply internalized orientation toward mobility, recognition, and aesthetic transformation, cultivated through exposure to visible symbols of transnational success. Italy functioned less as a concrete destination than as a persistent object of longing—a "thirst" sustained by images, stories, and material displays promising dignity and distinction. While her choices appear strategic and self-directed, they unfolded within structural conditions that tied legal security, economic survival, and social legitimacy to gendered intimacy and emotional labor. By using relationships as migratory and economic resources, Aeen exercised a constrained but meaningful form of agency, continually negotiating opportunities and vulnerabilities. Her story highlights how aspiration itself can become a structuring force in migration, driving action even when material outcomes remain fragile and uncertain.

Case Study 4: Ranjith Ubewansa (Podi Ranji)

Ranjith Ubewansa, better known as Podi Ranji, is a 42-year-old permanent resident of Catania, Sicily. He first arrived in Naples at the age of 19 in 1997 using a "helmet passport," pasting his photograph on someone else's visa. Today, he earns a substantial income through both legal and illegal means and holds wide influence among Sri Lankan migrant networks in Italy, particularly facilitating women arriving from Romania.

"I grew up in Wenappuwa," he recalls. "My father was a fisherman, my mother made dried fish, and my brother ran a small shop. I dropped out of school in grade 9 and helped him. I've always been mischievous—lying, cheating, tricking people... mostly to get money." Early on, he

began helping couples find rooms, tracking debtors, and doing broker work. Over time, he and his friends expanded into sending people abroad, making fake documents, and assisting with visas, earning substantial income. “Then I wondered why everyone was so obsessed with Italy. I had to see it for myself.”

Arriving in Naples, he discovered a stark reality: overcrowded housing, lack of work, and the pervasive presence of the mafia. “Where Sri Lankans lived... was hell. Mafia stronger than police. Thieves everywhere. I realized I couldn’t play the games I played back home—but I could learn the real game.” After three years in Naples, he moved to Catania, Sicily, and began providing informal facilitation to Sri Lankan migrants, helping with passports, certificates, and other documents—real or fake—while charging fees or offering loans with interest. He also created systems such as ‘*Seettu*’, a rotating savings group that provided arriving migrants with upfront cash to cover initial expenses. “If I don’t help them, who will?” he says.

Podi Ranji’s trajectory exemplifies Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) forms of capital. He accumulates economic capital not through formal employment but through hustling within informal networks: lending money, arranging documents, and running financial schemes. His social capital—ties to embassy staff, political figures, and transnational networks—establishes him as a gatekeeper for migrants seeking legitimacy, survival, or mobility. Although he lacks formal cultural capital, he thrives through embodied knowledge and practical mastery of Italy’s informal systems, exploiting bureaucratic loopholes and structural vulnerabilities.

Jean Baudrillard (1994) explains Podi Ranji’s story. Italy initially appeared as a paradise built from remittance-funded houses, stories, and visual markers of success—a simulation detached from lived reality. Upon arrival, he encountered overcrowded homes, mafia control, and economic precarity. Rather than rejecting this, he reinvented it, becoming both producer and

enforcer of new simulations: providing forged documents, establishing financial networks, orchestrating informal marriages, and assuming multiple roles as protector, employer, and father. Women arriving from Romania seeking “Little Ranji” pursue not only practical support but also the illusion of safety and opportunity within a carefully staged social world.

O’Connell Davidson’s (2015) concept of symbolic coercion further frames his operations. While women appear to consent to financial, intimate, and housing arrangements, these choices are structured by economic precarity, gendered vulnerability, and migration restrictions. Podi Ranji maintains authority and control while projecting benevolence, blurring the lines between assistance and exploitation. His actions demonstrate how symbolic power and emotional negotiation create a system where dependency and normalized inequality replace overt force.

Podi Ranji’s trajectory demonstrates how agency and power can be exercised within informal migration networks, blending entrepreneurship, social influence, and strategic performance. His success relies not on formal qualifications but on accumulated knowledge, practical skill, and the ability to navigate and manipulate structural vulnerabilities, transforming scarcity and precarity into opportunity. By providing financial, housing, and relational support to new migrants, he creates systems of dependency that mix protection with control, illustrating how symbolic and social power operate in transnational contexts. His story also highlights the interplay between imagination and reality: the aspirational “Little Italy” of visual wealth and remittance-funded success becomes a landscape he both inhabits and constructs, sustaining desire while mediating constraint. Podi Ranji’s life underscores the complex hierarchies within migrant communities, showing that agency can be both enabling and coercive, and that power often emerges through perception, networks, and the management of opportunity rather than formal authority.

Summary and Conclusion

The four case studies—Beatrice, Deepa Geethanjani, Anjaleena Dabare, and Ranjith Ubewansa (Podi Ranji)—collectively demonstrate that migration from Sri Lanka to Italy is far more than a strategy for economic survival. These narratives reveal migration as a complex interplay of desire, social networks, and symbolic aspiration, where individuals negotiate agency within structural constraints, yet their trajectories differ across gender, social positioning, and networked opportunities. Social and cultural capital is transformed into migration potential in ways that are deeply relational, affective, and strategic.

Bourdieu's (1984 and 1990) concepts of habitus, taste, and social capital illuminate how migrants navigate structural limitations while pursuing recognition, upward mobility, and social legitimacy. Women such as Anjaleena and Beatrice are drawn to "Little Rome" through an aesthetic and social imaginary of wealth, modernity, and prestige. Their aspirations reflect habitus shaped by local observation, media, and peer networks, where migration becomes a vehicle for symbolic transformation and social recognition. In contrast, Podi Ranji exemplifies the strategic deployment of social and embodied capital, orchestrating migration opportunities, establishing financial networks, and consolidating authority, despite lacking formal institutionalized cultural capital. Across the cases, the interplay of structure and agency is evident in the careful negotiation of relationships, labor, and networks.

Baudrillard's (1994) notion of simulation explains how imagined landscapes—remittance-funded houses, Facebook profiles, and mediated social realities—construct hyperreal desires that shape migration decisions. Marriages, intimate relationships, and labor are not simply practical acts; they serve as symbolic passages into these imagined worlds. Women's engagements with brokers, husbands, and informal networks, as seen in the narratives of Beatrice, Deepa, and

Anjaleena, reveal how fantasy, aspiration, and survival converge, producing both opportunities and dependencies. In these hyperreal spaces, the migrant body functions as a medium through which social and symbolic aspirations are enacted.

O'Connell Davidson's (2013 and 2005) framework of symbolic coercion highlights the subtle pressures embedded in migration decisions, especially for women. Choices that appear voluntary—marriages, relocation, or labor arrangements—are often shaped by economic necessity, social expectation, and broker-mediated networks. These women exercise agency while navigating these constraints, negotiating opportunities while reproducing structures of dependency. Men like Podi Ranji, meanwhile, exploit networks and relationships to establish authority, demonstrating how informal power structures govern access, mobility, and survival within transnational communities.

These narratives also foreground the affective, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of irregular migration. Recurrent references to “thirst,” aesthetic aspiration, and social recognition capture a profound longing for dignity, self-realization, and transformation. Local success stories, remittance landscapes, and visible migration networks act as both inspiration and pressure, shaping desires, guiding action, and sustaining imagined futures. Migration emerges as a performance—a negotiation of identity, belonging, and aspiration enacted through labor, relationships, and social navigation.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that migration is simultaneously real and imagined, strategic and affective, practical and symbolic. By integrating ethnographic narratives with the theoretical lenses of Bourdieu, Baudrillard, and O'Connell Davidson, it shows how desire, imagination, and structural opportunity converge to produce pathways of mobility that are constrained yet creatively enacted. The journeys of Sri Lankan migrants—through marriage,

informal networks, or transnational facilitation—reveal migration as a profoundly human process, shaped by imagination, aspiration, and social negotiation. The recurring concept of “thirst” captures the enduring hunger for recognition, dignity, and transformation. Migration becomes a medium through which individuals negotiate structural constraints, enact social and symbolic aspirations, and construct new possibilities of life, revealing the deeply strategic, creative, and emotionally resonant dimensions of mobility from rural Sri Lanka to Italy.

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