

To marry or not to marry?

Studying others to know myself

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Reflection is integral to ethnographic work; it situates the ethnographer's insights, beliefs, fears, motivations and confrontations within the larger framework of investigation. But as ethnographers, do we always listen to and act upon our personal reflection? To what extent are we able to go beyond writing reflexively and turn those insights into self-exploration? Using the example of my research on life stories of elderly women in long-term marriages in suburban Mumbai, I explore the relationship between reflexivity and self-exploration. First, I describe my motivation to research this topic. I analyze the contents of reflectional notes from my personal journal and master's thesis to understand the impact the research had on me. I consider possible explanations for my inability to listen to or accept my own reflections and self-exploration during fieldwork and the consequences on my personal life at the end of the research period.

[reflexivity, research, anthropology, self-exploration, marriage, love, elderly women, India]

Though we belonged to the same village and studied in the same high school, it was only during our university days that we realized our liking towards each other. Our friends teased and called us a 'couple'. Over years, we developed a deep bond of friendship that we used to call 'intellectual companionship'. I used to feel good about myself whenever he was around. He always challenged me to think beyond the obvious and encouraged me to follow my dreams. We never had to tell each other 'I love you'. Love was felt mutually and did not require special words or means of expression. We both wanted to build a life together and yet allow each other space and freedom. Our families were against our marriage for we belonged to different castes but we knew that we had found our life partner. Against the wishes of the families we got married and never had to regret our decision. What started as simple liking became a starting point for our long and fulfilling marriage of 37 years. We stood by each other in the hardest of times and we also accomplished a lot due to support from each other (Mrs. M., 60 year old married Indian woman).

I was listening intently to my respondent, Mrs. M. I felt energised, happy and optimistic about my own upcoming marriage as we concluded our conversation. Hers was indeed a unique story in comparison to all the other stories I gathered during my ethnographic research on the experiences of married elderly women in suburban Mumbai, India.

This interview took place in June 2010. Today, when I reflect on the past two years, I can connect the dots of a number of personal insights and series of events that unfolded in my life. I do not think that I was fully aware of these insights while I was still immersed in my research. It took another year or so for me to even begin to analyze and understand a personal decision that was closely linked to and influenced by my research on women's narratives on their long-term marriages in India. In this paper, I will describe my process of self-exploration, as a result of my ethnographic fieldwork, and the subsequent impact on my personal life. I will take an anthropological approach to explore ethnographic reflexivity as a tool for a deep conscious and unconscious self-exploration during the fieldwork and writing processes. I will further link the life stories of elderly married women to my ultimate awareness that I did not share certain sociocultural norms that define women's roles and position in marital relationships in my (Indian) society.

This is the story of my life, as I understood it to be at the time, throughout a year of training in medical anthropology and weeks that followed. 'Being reflexive about your own views, positions, status as a researcher and how it affects your relationship with the respondents is important. We need to see your presence in the writing but not just narcissistic description of yourself,' we were told during our methodology class. I took this advice to the field when I began my data collection. In the months that followed, I did not realize the moment when reflection became a constant in my everyday and academic life with detailed notes in a personal diary at the end of each interview with my respondents. I did not know then how confronting reflection could be and the emotions it would stir in me every single day as my family was busy preparing for my marriage. Tears smudged many pages of my diary, even while I was writing my notes, but I did not question them. Notwithstanding the associated emotional outbursts, I did not even take my words of reflection seriously. I was deaf to my deepest emotions and perhaps that was a conscious decision. I just wanted to get married like the majority of young Indian women do. I could not explain why I did not feel the slightest excitement about my upcoming marriage. Instead, I was filled with fear, uncertainty and nervousness about my decision to get married and my future life in Mumbai as a married woman. My research may not have answered my research question in the way I had expected, but it definitely showed me that I was not ready to marry the man who I had chosen. I silenced that insight and focussed all my attention on my research and graduation. 'Once I have defended my research, I will feel better and then I won't be so afraid of my marriage,' I convinced myself. Why did I do that? I hope to find answer by writing this paper on self-exploration as an outcome of ethnographic research.

Why did I want to study marriage and love in the lives of elderly Indian women?

कार्येषु मन्त्रि कर्तुणेषु दासी रूपेषु लक्ष्मी कृषमेषु धरतिरी।
स्नेहेषु माता शयनेषु रम्भा सत्कर्म नारी कुलधर्म पत्नी॥

*The ideal wife is the one who is an efficient minister (to run the household),
subservient to her husband, virtuous like the goddess Lakshmi,
forgiving like mother earth, a loving mother to her children,
enticing and skilled like Rambha in bed and
who always walks the righteous path.*
(Sanskrit poem)

I, the ethnographer

If someone had asked me at the beginning of my training in anthropology to describe myself, I would have answered: 'I am a 30 year old, professionally trained, career-oriented, successful, unmarried, Hindu woman from a high caste but lower-middle class family in suburban Mumbai'. Each of these adjectives tells a story about who I am and the life path I am expected to walk in my society. Though it seems like a great starting point in the eyes of most of my colleagues and friends outside India, something was terribly wrong with the 'same me' for my family and friends back in India. Being 30 and not married was a defect that outweighed all my professional and other personal achievements, even for my mother. However, at age of twelve when I learned about the Sanskrit poem mentioned above, I found the expectations of an Indian marriage for women too demanding. My reluctance, scepticism and fear about marriage were not convincing people around me and arguing with them logically was out of question. Instead I chose to focus on my career. Surprisingly, while studying in Amsterdam, an old friend of mine from India asked me to marry him. We shared similar values and felt comfortable with each other. He knew my fears about marriage and promised that I would have my 'space and freedom' even after marriage to follow my dreams and career aspirations. That was the most important assurance for me, and so I accepted his marriage proposal.

This was also a rational choice. My marriage would certainly have made my mother happy, and I would have successfully transitioned into an important phase of the life cycle of an Indian woman – being married and raising a family. I admit that somewhere deep inside, I felt that I would lack something if I were not married. I was less than my fellow women who not only had careers, but were also raising a family. The lives of my married female friends made me acutely aware of my 'incomplete' unmarried life. I seriously wanted to be like my friends and describe myself as a 'young married women with a successful career, a supportive husband and two healthy children.' This man gave me the hope and possibility that I could become the woman that I had always thought I'd wanted to be.

I decided to research what marriage entailed before being married. That way, I thought I could prepare myself to face the challenges of marriage and to learn from the experiences of women who had been married for a long time. My ethnographic research involved life-story interviews with elderly middle class women who had been married for thirty-five years or more and lived in suburban Mumbai. The conversations with my respondents took place in Marathi, which is the mother tongue for all of us, and explored the role that love might have played in the stability and success of their marriage. I knew that for this generation of women, romantic love had not been a starting point of marriage, but I hoped that during their long years of living together, they had felt love for and from their partner. I expected that their understanding of love would be different than love as understood by my generation. Through their stories, I wanted marriage to look and feel as though men and women shared equal space and responsibility towards family and treated each other with respect – a kind of marriage and married life I was hoping for. I don't know if I was just naive to think that their stories were going to show me a different world of marriage. Did I not know many couples around me in Mumbai who had been married for long time, but could not even talk to each other face to face? Did I not know couples who lived practically separate lives under the same roof, but projected a 'happy family' to the outside world? Clearly, I was not willing to accept what I already knew, especially when I had agreed to marry. I hoped that this research would convince me, beyond doubt, that marriage was not as scary and restrictive as I had viewed it overall and in my own family.

In Mumbai for fieldwork

I returned to Mumbai in the beginning of May 2010 to start my fieldwork. It was difficult to find elderly men and women who were willing to be part of my research. Most people that I approached found my topic strange and irrelevant to the life they lived in marriage. Men were particularly critical of my research question and did not want to be part of the study. Elderly women, in contrast, were interested in sharing their stories, but were extremely busy running their households and taking care of grandchildren. Making convenient appointments for them and creating space and privacy for these intimate conversations were my first challenges. In the end, I managed to gather in-depth life stories of nine women who had been married for 35 years or more. Women in this generation generally had arranged marriages and only one of my respondents had married the man she loved.

The stories I heard

I was not surprised to hear that with the exception of one woman, all my respondents described difficult marriages, yet were resigned to their fate. Mrs. J. is one example.

Your uncle [her husband] probably felt bad that I was not as educated as he was and he firmly believed that I had no idea or understanding of his work. His world revolved around his work; I or my children had no place in that world. It was work when he was at

work and it was work when he was home. My children had borne the brunt of his stress from office many evenings when he would beat them up for making noise. Soon they learned to remain silent the moment they heard the doorbell ring each evening. They knew their father was home.

What surprised me the most about the life story of Mrs. J. was how she accepted her situation. She did not complain; there was no flicker of pain in her narration. She told me her story without emotion. I could not imagine living her life for 35 years. I wondered what kept her going for so long, and she instantly explained that her two children had given meaning to her life and had become a source of happiness. She laughed and added that she had never earned a penny on her own. So remaining married was her only survival strategy to live a respectable and meaningful life and successfully raise two children.

Mrs. B. echoed similar sentiments and elaborated on the limited choices women have after marriage, particularly when things go wrong.

My husband often says to me, 'In your family girls were just a burden.' Your father's quote was '[You have to] die where you are given (married),' as if he is done with his responsibility once he has married his daughters. 'You cannot come back whatever happens; the doors to your natal home are closed for you now.' That is true; we had no option to return permanently to our father's house. Four of us were lucky; at least we had good husbands. But my youngest sister's life was spoiled as the man she was married to turned out to be a terrible husband and a bad father. My sister suffered all her life; she is suffering even today.

All my respondents firmly believed that marriage is an important and essential step in a woman's life. Marriage in India provides women with social status, respect, protection from other men, financial stability and motherhood (Grover 2009; Thapan 2003). They felt that it was in their best interest to stay married and provide a stable family environment for their children, even if it meant compromise and unhappiness in their own lives. What happens if a woman in this society decides to walk out of a marriage? One of my respondents decided to end her marriage of 32 years, and I used her story as an anonymized vignette to generate discussions with my respondents and hear their reactions.

I understand what she has gone through, but does she think her life will be any better now after leaving him? Within marriage, he made her life difficult but he was her husband. Now in her 60s, all the men outside her house are going to make her life a living hell (Mrs. B., 62 years).

She must be out of her mind; she is in her 60s, how many more years anyways are left in our life now? Why let the society know about problems in your personal life, that too after all these years? [It] makes no sense to me (Mrs. D., 65 years).

When I contacted this woman a year later to find out how she was doing with her decision, she told me that she had decided not to divorce her husband. They had made arrangements to spend as little time as possible in the same house and to spend most of their time in separate cities. When asked why she had reconsidered her decision, she clarified that seeking a divorce had put significant pressure on her, especially from the families of her married daughters and her own extended family and friends. 'Everyone thought I was being unrealistic and crazy. My daughters were in a more difficult situation, as they had to face the fact that they were the daughters of a mother who was seeking a divorce after such long marriage. If this is what a mother does, how would the daughters fare in their marriage? That is how they think about me,' she explained.

Talking to women about love within marriage was more difficult than I had thought. Romantic love, according to my respondents, is not essential for a successful marriage. One need not express love in words or actions; rather, love is assumed to be the foundation of marriage when the husband and wife have stayed together, in spite of all the hardships in life and individual differences (Trawick 1990). Mrs. J. elaborated the story of her marriage further.

I got married at the age of twenty not because I loved or liked the man, but because I wanted to clear the path of my eldest brother to get married. He was already turning 30. I was happy to know that my future husband was 5 feet 10 inches tall and was not addicted to alcohol or cigarettes. I was 5 feet 6 inches tall, which is taller for women by Indian standards and hence a concern for my mother. Ours was an 'arranged marriage'. He [the groom] had lost his mother a month ago, and they needed a woman to look after the house and the three men, the widowed father, him and his younger brother who had physical and mental disability requiring constant care. [She laughed]. Is it not good that in our society, a man can get married and bring in a wife who will care for his family and he need not even pay her?

I kept staring at Mrs. J., trying to read her face and the slight sarcastic tinge in her voice, which I could not ignore against the backdrop of the apparently indifferent face. I often felt that she was telling her story to me in a way that although it was her story, she was not there in it. The voice speaking to me was telling me the story of the body that was moving around me; it was as if her body and her voice were two distinct entities in the room. The words seemed more real when she described how she felt about her life; but she continued to speak as if the words were meant to describe the life of this woman's body.

Love as understood in the West and by younger Indians was highly criticized by my respondents as an individual-centric notion.

Love is not our concept, [at least] not the way you young people understand it. It is just 'want' and greed for material things. You girls need flowers, fancy vacations and solitaire diamonds to feel the love of your husbands. That is not love at all. There is no limit to what your husband could buy for you to demonstrate his love but that is not enough if

you don't respect each other and take your responsibility as a couple towards your family seriously. That explains why many marriages are ending in divorce these days as they are based on such faulty notions of romantic love, which doesn't equip one to sail through the ups and downs of life (Mrs. D., 65 years).

Mrs. D. sounded angry and bitter towards young Indians, and she was not alone. All my respondents were extremely critical of my research question: whether love between a husband and wife contributed towards the stability and success of marriage in India. They thought that I was coming from a highly Western viewpoint of love and imposing it on marriages in India for a generation when no one married for love. My research question, according to them, was irrelevant and highly biased. Apart from being critical of love as a commodity, they also perceived it as a Western notion, a side effect of modernization that was rapidly influencing younger generations in India. In their eyes, I represented this other generation of Indians who had forgotten the values of the soil and culture. In my case, it was even more obvious for my studies and travels abroad and having postponed marriage for so long. I became increasingly uncomfortable with this new identity my respondents bestowed upon me – a Westernized, modern and hence self-centred woman who understood love as a consumer product. I did not share those views or values about love, but I felt incapable of refuting these personal critiques because of the life choices I had made.

Sacrifice and endurance in marriage: My increasing awareness

Endurance, patience, acceptance, compromise, being selfless and putting the interests of the family first were a few of the qualities my respondents deemed essential for a woman to have a successful marriage. We can see many of these qualities in the life of Mrs. B., especially during the early years of her marriage.

He was a teacher in government school but he always thought that he had to take care of his ailing parents and younger brothers financially. His two younger brothers who were completing college continued to live with us, but his parents also preferred to visit us often and stay for long periods. We had a single room in those days and there were seven people living there. We never really had privacy to be with each other in an intimate way. We both were young, we had desires and need for closeness but it was not possible. How to do 'it' when there are five other people sleeping in the same room including his parents? We did not feel it was appropriate. Though I was not working outside, all the household work, cooking was entirely on me. Since our house was always hosting people who came to Mumbai for medical treatment, I was also involved in nursing care at home. I used to feel very tired by the end of the day and would never feel like 'it' (sexual intimacy). My feelings for 'it' died down very early in our married life. It was not because of him. He was a very sensitive and caring person. He did everything to support me, but I was hoping to have more space, some privacy and free time for ourselves. Later he took a loan and we bought a little bigger place, and then came more financial worries. I had four

abortions in the same time and one of my daughters died eight days after birth. I became very sad and low, often spent days crying silently. He could see my suffering but could not do much about it. I had no physical rest after abortions and that delivery. I had to do all the household work. I became very weak both emotionally and physically.

It was clear that intimacy and emotional bonding between the couples was significantly affected by the lack of space and privacy and financial worries. This was a recurring theme in all the conversations I had with my respondents. I had seen my parents going through similar struggles while I grew up in a single room inhabited by five adults and two children. I continue to see the same struggles in the lives of my married cousins and other relatives, even today. But at the same time, the Indian traditional perspective of marriage is as a steady unfaltering commitment to one another and to the larger family (children and ageing parents) allowing a couple to bond (Trawick 1992), to value one another's contribution and to respect each other. Research in psychology and the anthropology of love often describes sexual attraction and intimacy bringing the potential partners together as well as playing an evolutionary role by encouraging couples to procreate (Dion & Dion 1996; Jankowiak & Fischer 1992; Sternberg 1986). In the life stories of my respondents, none of the women got married for sexual attraction or passion. In the early years of marriage, being sexually intimate with their husbands was rather difficult due to living arrangements, lack of privacy and the shame associated with being openly intimate with their husband when the in-laws were around. Why did these couples stay together in marriage for so long? What was at stake for them to stay married?

I think that in the generation of my respondents, both men and women were raised in large extended families and they had seen their parents and other married couples setting the example of being together, sacrificing so that the family remains strong as a unit, and every member of the family particularly the elderly and the children are supported financially, emotionally and functionally (cf. Trawick 1992). My respondents were convinced that marriage is a commitment for life, even before they were married, based on these traditions. The women were sympathetic towards those in a bad marriage, but that was seen more as fate and not something that a woman can actively decide to end. Divorce was not an option due to stigma and because most women were financially dependent on their husbands. Women became visible in the workforce and labour market from the late 1970s (Agnihotri & Mazumdar 1995), but financial independence was not enough to end a marriage. A woman seeking divorce in India is often seen as an outlier, a woman who has broken the norms of what an ideal woman should be and the role for which her mother and grandmothers had systematically prepared her. All my respondents directly or indirectly narrated stories of pain and suffering in a marriage, but this suffering and loss of self was legitimized if it was at the hands of a husband and for the greater common goal of a successful marriage and stable family. They were more worried about suffering from social isolation and the vulnerability of being a divorced woman than staying in difficult marriages. They indeed did not think it was appropriate for women to try and live without a man in any phase of life.

But I was still curious. If the notion of love, as understood by my generation, is a Western notion, then what was the Indian notion of love between husband and wife? If love is not a commodity that can be exchanged, how did they express love for their husbands? What made them feel that they were loved by their husbands? Women often expressed their love for their husband by taking care of him, his parents and family and their children. They were attentive to the needs of each family member; they were always available for the family, both physically and emotionally. They cared for ailing elderly parents and they ran the households, sometimes along with the paid jobs that they held. Family was their first priority and then came the self. Forgetting oneself and what they would have liked to do with their own life while they were raising a 'successful' family was their way of showing their husband and society that they loved this man and were willing to sacrifice everything to make sure that their marriage remained intact and their children were raised carefully. No wonder then that qualities they deemed essential for a successful marriage were endurance, patience, compromise, self-sacrifice and low expectations for the self.

How did they feel the love of their husbands? Did they expect similar self-sacrifice and endurance from their husbands? Interestingly, they did not. They explained that men and women are distinct in Indian culture. Men have the large responsibility of providing for the family. They have different qualities than women and are not expected to be patient and enduring – qualities that must be demonstrated by the woman. This way, women can complement the men and the marriage remains intact, like the wheels of a chariot. This explanation based on gender norms in my society did not surprise me. However, I was amazed to learn that my respondents perceived the active involvement of their husbands in raising a family and sharing household responsibilities as the crucial sign of his love. The absence of these two contributions was interpreted as his lack of love. Mrs. J. described this lack of love with a train metaphor:

My marriage is like parallel rails, running along with each other with the aim that the train (family) runs smooth on it. Like the two lines, we met with each other very rarely at the crossings, but that was also with the aim that the train could change tracks. I have never heard a word of affection or love from him in the last thirty-five years. He never involved himself with me on emotional level. It was not just me; he never attached himself even to the children. I never saw him playing with our children, sitting down with them, talking to them, putting them to sleep, feeding them or taking care of their urine or shit. He never made an effort to understand my needs. None of my emotional needs were ever fulfilled; in fact they were never even heard. He never paid any heed to my feelings, emotions or needs.

And Mrs. D. told me,

My husband even at age of seventy doesn't make a cup of tea for himself. When our children were young, I used to go to my mother's house for a few days each summer. I used to make sure I had cooked enough food for him; I had arranged his clothes properly so that his work and his life wouldn't be disturbed while I was gone.

What I would expect as an issue of gender equality or inequality, they experienced as love or lack of love. That was a striking difference between my respondents and me.

My family experience as reflected by the women's stories

I did not have many positive examples of married couples in my family. The marriage of my parents, the one that I was a close witness of, seemed terribly difficult and unhappy. Their marriage was further complicated by my father's chronic alcohol dependence and I have seen my mother work extremely hard to provide for the family both financially and emotionally. The marriages of my uncles, aunts and cousins were no different. In fact, I often wondered why all these people around me chose to remain married and project a happy-couple face to the world outside, while privately they lived separate and lonely lives. I must admit though, that these same marriages are often talked about in my society as successful marriages because the couples have stayed together in spite of immense difficulties and they are applauded. I failed to see what was successful in these marriages. Growing up in such surroundings convinced me that marriage could not be happy and fulfilling, it seemed like a commitment to a lifetime of compromise and silent suffering. Prospects of marrying in near future made me extremely nervous and scared. I wrote in my thesis (Satalkar 2010):

When he asked me to marry him, I wanted to run out of his reach. All my fears and scepticism about marriage came back haunting me. I feared that I would not remain the same 'me' anymore; I would have to give up my freedom even when I was to marry a person of my choice. I feared that marriage would end the friendship between us and we would remain only a husband and wife, the relation that resonated inequality, compromises, adjustments and sorrow in my mind. I was unsure about myself and my qualities to be a good wife and worried that I could only create more troubles for myself and for my husband by getting married.

'Insider' or 'outsider'?

The researcher is the critical instrument of any anthropological research, whether conducted at home or in a foreign land. However, the ethnographer who is immersed in the community often remains in marginal position in the fieldwork site. Herzfeld (1983: 151) describes this tension beautifully. He notes:

Every ethnographer is in some sense marginal to the society being studied. That marginality is not a static condition, however, but entails a constant (if inconsistent) shifting to and fro across social boundaries that are themselves highly volatile...The condition of marginality allows informants, who are just as interested in the curious human intruder as the latter is in them, to include or exclude the ethnographer more or less at will.... But – and this is the real crux of the matter – no ethnographer can ever claim to have been one

or the other [insider or outsider,] in an *absolute* sense. The very fact of negotiating one's status in the community precludes any such possibility. Anthropologists have to learn to adapt to events in which they themselves are significant actors. [Italics in original]

Throughout my fieldwork, I was constantly shifting my position as a researcher at two significant levels. Although I was born and raised in the same Indian community where I conducted my research, in many ways I felt like an outsider. There were definite advantages of being a woman from the community, but it also made me overtly conscious and careful about the norms and borders of what is considered a decent conversation and what could be interpreted as unwarranted poking into someone's personal life. On the other hand, I also knew that my respondents would feel obliged to answer my questions because refusing to answer is perceived as rude in my society.

I was also not really an insider. Most of my life choices as an adult significantly diverged from the expected life course for an Indian woman. My financial independence at 23, training as a medical doctor, regular travel within and outside India for further education and the lack of a husband to provide for these activities made me different from most Indian women, and in particular, the generation of my respondents.

A second aspect my role as a researcher studying marriage concerned disclosing my plans for marriage in the near future. I feared that my respondents might change their answers if they knew I was going to be married in a few months. I worried that they might try and paint a rosy picture of their marriage in order to encourage me. I expected that they would not advise a young woman of marriageable age not to get married unless they really regretted being married. On another level, I needed them to provide me with factual details of their life, so that I could be better prepared for my married life. Thus, initially, I was unsure about disclosing my upcoming marriage.

Ultimately, my fear of disclosure was easily resolved. Most women I spoke with were so curious and concerned about my unmarried status that they wanted to know my marriage plans even before agreeing to talk to me: 'Enough of studies now! When will you start thinking about marriage seriously?' I chose the easy way out and told them about my upcoming marriage. I did not want to hide this personal fact about my life before asking about their marriage. The disclosure also created a relationship between us. Our conversations became situated between elderly married women and a young researcher who was about to marry.

Thus, I was living at least three distinct identities as a researcher. In my mind, I was an Indian unmarried researcher exploring long-term marriages before my own marriage. I had shared my fears about marriage with my respondents and had asked them to guide me with their experiences. They saw me as an educated, successful but unmarried Indian woman, who was highly influenced by individual-centred 'Western' ideologies and who, for some reason, was delaying her marriage. The men that I approached in the beginning of this research were explicit in their refusal to be part of this study. Did they sense my sceptical views about marriage and see me as someone who would be unable to understand their stories due to my own biases?

A novice in need of advice

While carrying out this research, my presence as an individual and a researcher was constantly challenged by my respondents. The borders between my world and my respondents' world, my story and their stories, were so faint that I did not even realize the point when I stopped narrating and discussing their story and used their words as a thread to weave another pattern with my own story or my parents' story. In the anthropological tradition, I was the researcher trying to learn from the experience of my respondents. Encounters with my respondents were more than simply asking questions. Most of my respondents actively questioned me about my research objectives and the relevance of my research topic to my own marriage plans. The women openly criticized me for being highly Westernized based on my intention to study romantic love in long-term Indian marriages. They were explicit in their disapproval of my topic, saying it was too Western and hence not applicable to their lives. The women talked to me as if I was representative of the younger Indian generation that had become individual-centric in the disguise of modernity. Mrs. B. elaborated on the difference in upbringing in her times and mine:

We grew up in a joint family with a large number of children. Our parents had just enough money to feed all heads. We were taught to never demand for things, to think about the others first and share whatever we had. But we spoiled our children (your generation) by giving you too much attention and love. You got all that you wanted without having to make efforts for it. You don't know what it means to think about others as all you are used to is *my* life, *my* career, *my* choice, the constant obsession with 'my and I'. We thought about everyone but us and continue the same and you think about no one but yourself and don't know the word adjustment.

I was indeed seen as part of this selfish young generation who did not know the word 'compromise'; but did I see myself the same way? Was I selfish and uncaring about others? Thinking back over my life, I remembered being aware of what I wanted and what I did not want; but I didn't think I was really selfish. Why is it bad for a woman to know to what extent she is willing to adjust and compromise in a marriage and expect her husband to compromise as well? Every time I was referred to as a 'self-centred' woman, it made me uncomfortable.

Though in public I could be called the 'subject who knows' based on this research, in the private interactions I had with the married women, they were the 'subjects who knew'. They knew what it meant to be married for many years and I was the one learning from their experiences and words of advice. They were clearly conscious of that role and took the opportunity to 'teach' me their lessons of a good married life. Anja Kruimeich (1994) had similar experiences during her fieldwork in Dominican Republic, when she found herself pregnant while working on her doctoral research studying the perceptions, practices, needs and expectations of Dominican mothers regarding pregnancy, delivery and childcare. Her status of being a pregnant young woman away from her home and family gave her a distinct access and connection with the Domini-

can mothers who were more than willing to share their experiences and traditional knowledge about pregnancy, child birth and care. She was not seen as just a researcher anymore, but rather as a young woman who was experiencing motherhood for the first time and hence needed support and guidance.

Trying to make sense of marriage in India

My respondents were convinced that marriage is a decisive event in the life cycle of an Indian woman. They were groomed by their mothers and grandmothers for this role. They were married, not on the foundation of romantic love, but rather based on other factors such as their education, their fathers' ability to pay the dowry, the caste of the groom and the socioeconomic background of the family. Traditional gender roles and division of labour between men and women underwent slow change in the lifetime of my respondents and attributed to women's empowerment through education, paid work and strong influence of the feminist movement in the 1970s (DeLong 2003).

My respondents equated their husbands' active involvement in raising the children and running the household as love for them and their children. They believed that love is not something that needs to be expressed in words or particular actions, but has to be felt from within. Love was assumed to develop over years of living together and getting used to each other while providing for the family. Similar themes were described by Trawick (1990), based on her ethnographic work on love in a Tamil family in India. Perhaps I had been premature to think that an Indian marriage with a man chosen by me, who shared my ideologies (unlike a match arranged by my parents) would differ from the marriages that I had known and witnessed through the media, reading and from my respondents' stories. I knew that there were many individuals like me who aspired to live a different and more equal married life, but marriage in my society is still seen as a family association and a community event. What is important is not just the couple's compatibility, but rather the compatibility and adjustment between two distinct families (Tiwari 2008).

What interested me about the women's narratives was how our views and ideas about love differed. A husband taking active responsibility in household work and raising children in my mind is about equality between the genders and not necessarily love. The women described love between husband and wife in my (Indian) society as glue to hold the family together, so the children and the elderly of the family could be well cared for. A couple was praised for their virtue if they stayed married for the well-being of the family in spite of their personal differences. Other motivations to remain married despite dissatisfaction were financial dependence on a husband, worries about children, fear of social isolation and lack of support from a natal family. The suffering or unhappiness within marriage was legitimized and internalized as part of the 'deal', a price one has to pay for a respectable social life.

Did I see myself living that life? Being married was not the only way of earning social respect, in my opinion, nor did I need my natal family or anyone else to support me financially. I did have a personal social network and support system drawn

from carefully built bonds of friendships with people from India and outside. What I really expected from marriage was the emotional and intellectual companionship described by Mrs. M. I hoped that my fiancé would support my personal and professional choices and provide me with the space to flourish and grow as an individual, rather than being expected to play a good wife, daughter-in-law and mother. Romantic love was not the starting point of our relationship or decision to marry; rather it was our friendship and mutual trust and respect for one another. However, did I need to be married to gain respect and status in my society? The other aspect of marriage that bothered me was the binding commitment for a lifetime. Divorce, though gradually on the rise in my society, is still frowned upon in general. I was happy that my respondents did not paint a rosy picture of married life in an effort to convince me of the importance and benefits of marriage. They were honest and told me their stories without filtering out the hardships, disappointments and loneliness they experienced through their long years of marriage.

Although I am presenting more negative comments and experiences of my respondents about marriage, a few did have positive things to say, such as their increased sense of freedom and independence after marriage compared to their natal homes. Mrs. B. included positive experiences in her narrative:

I bought the first sari of my choice after marriage; it was my husband who asked me to accompany him to the shop to buy a sari. I never had bought clothes for myself. Even my mother never bought clothes for herself. My father would bring the cheapest and most affordable cloth from which my mother was expected to stitch clothes for all five sisters. We hated to wear dresses all made from same cloth but we had no choice.

These were encouraging aspects of marriage for my respondents, but how did it affect me as a person who was obviously concerned about her freedom in marriage? I saw freedom more as a right rather than a privilege. I grew up in a family where I was always encouraged to make my own choices. Over the years, I made many important decisions for myself ranging from my professional training and career to delaying my marriage. I took for granted buying dresses to my liking or vegetables to my taste. The freedom of choice in my life that I wished for, particularly after marriage, was a continuation of what I had already experienced and involved complicated themes like whether or not I want to have a child, continue with my career, and retain my individual life in spite of being someone's wife.

It is interesting to note how certain narratives penetrated more deeply into my conscious than others. As I look back at my fieldwork notes, I clearly see that I was more affected by and pulled towards the narrations that in my opinion were negative, confronting and scary. My inability to get a straight story from men compelled me to hear women's stories of marriage with a shade of anger and frustration. Despite some positive comments and experiences of the women, I saw and interpreted a disparate story in their body language and heard more of the 'not so great' aspects of their lives. It was only when I returned to Amsterdam and started systematically analyzing my notes that I began to see small facets of hope and happiness within their stories. But

predominantly, I saw pain, suffering and vulnerability, even though the women may not have described their married lives in these exact words. Perhaps this was a continuation of my self-exploration?

What does this experience say about me as a researcher? Would my interpretation of the women's stories have been different if I had sincerely believed in the emotional fulfilment one experiences in marriage or if I had not been about to get married? Although I set out to see 'successful' marriages and understand the 'recipe' for them by listening to stories of 'successfully' married Indian women, I managed to convince myself that it was not a good idea to be married. But it required even more time and confrontation with the Indian social reality for me to call off my wedding. Was this decision really in line with what my research had taught me? Had I experienced a self-exploration that culminated in becoming aware that I could not succumb to an Indian marriage – even a modern one? I came to realize that I had changed over time and specifically during the research process and I could no longer imagine suppressing my feelings as the women I had spoken with had done for more than 35 years in their marriages.

From self-exploration through ethnography to action

As I reread my field notes now, I see how I became acutely aware of my fears about marriage that were reinforced by my fieldwork. I also noticed that despite listening to the women's stories, I convinced myself not to listen to my own fears. My initial excitement about researching a 'happy and light-hearted topic' like love had definitely turned serious and emotionally draining. I quote from my notes.

Their stories had immense impact on me emotionally to the extent that in the middle of my fieldwork, I contemplated to put my marriage on hold for some time. I felt that I did not have the qualities required for successful marriage as enlisted by my respondents. I became bitter and tense about my research and also felt angry at myself for choosing a research topic which was so closely linked with my personal life. My interpretation of their life stories convinced me that I was heading towards a doom's day by getting married. I had not imagined such a close relation between my emotions and their stories and I often wonder if my emotional involvement and strong personal connection with respondents during this research coloured my interpretation of their stories.

It was not that I could not separate my life from my respondents. I was aware that we (my respondents and I) represented two distinct generations. Indian society has changed and women now are more empowered. There was every reason for me to believe that I could live a different married life than my respondents, since I was an educated and financially independent woman living in a society that was slowly opening up to a new concept of marriage based on equality between partners and mutual fulfilment. But I was struggling a great deal to understand how my life would look in marriage. I was constantly crossing the blurred borders of time and social context as

a researcher and as a young woman. Here is an entry from my personal diary during fieldwork.

If qualities like being patient, selfless, accommodating and accepting, having low expectations from the marriage and the husband are the virtues I need to remain married, I am not sure what my future will look like. This is scary. Everyone is telling me that I am being irrational. I can't put myself into the frame of their lives. The times have changed; the men and women in India are changing. I know it, but I cannot get over this feeling of despair. I feel I can't do it, I can't complete this research and I can't get married. I want to call off my wedding as I am not at all sure about my preparedness for it emotionally and intellectually. I accept the fact that I could not remain objective and distant from my respondents rather I am all caught up in their lives; I made cross-connections between their lives and mine just because we all are women from India. I think more than interpreting their life from my perspective, what we will call researcher understanding the lived experiences of her respondents; I landed up interpreting my own life in the context of the stories of these women.

Unfortunately, these thoughts remained private in my personal journal and I did not bring them out. I wanted to get rid of these fears and go ahead with marriage. I made every effort to convince myself that I would be fine, as I had chosen my partner and I was an independent woman with multiple possibilities to make my own successful marriage story. My final words of reflection in the thesis manuscript (Satakar 2010) were:

At some time during fieldwork, I was asked the same question that I was asking my respondents. What does love mean to me? Do I really love the man I am going to marry? How do I experience it? These were difficult questions and I did not have clear answers. One thing I have learned though, certain answers can't be found by carrying out 'scientific' research, as there are way too many confounders. The key is to experience it and live it. Like they say in India, you survive a marriage only by getting married and not by standing on the shore and wondering whether you would survive or not. So here I am plunging into holy matrimony precisely in a week's time after my graduation and time will unfold the story of my marriage.

Runaway bride

I remained true to my last words of reflection. The day after my graduation, I was India-bound to get married exactly one week later to the man I had chosen. Once in Mumbai, I busied myself with getting ready for the big day. We had agreed to a small and private marriage ceremony with a few family members. My marriage was to take place in his native city in southern India. I flew there with only my mother and brother and then learned that my future husband's family had invited five hundred guests from their side. This surprised me a great deal. My partner and his parents tried to

convince me that marriage is a communal event and it was impossible to go against tradition. Suddenly, tradition and social norms became more important than our individual preferences and prior agreements. I began to suspect that these social pressures would only increase after marriage. Was my partner willing to support and defend my needs at that time? No clear and convincing answer from him gave me my answer. I concluded that it was not a good idea to get married. I called off my wedding the day before it was to occur and created a huge social scandal around me. I disappointed my partner, close family members and friends from both sides. My decision caused great humiliation to our families. Overnight I became an outcast in my own community, but at some level I finally felt at peace. I had escaped the social expectations and burdens of marriage, just at the right moment.

I believe now that my ethnographic research significantly influenced my personal life. As I progressed from one interview to another, from one woman's story of sacrifice and challenge to another, my self-exploration was leading me directly to a denouement due to my conflicted attitude toward my impending marriage. The conflict resolved somewhat differently than I had expected, but it was also part of my self-exploration. I did not make peace with marriage, as I had set out to do through my research. Instead, I made peace with myself as a single Indian woman and accepted that I could continue to lead a happy and successful life as such.

Notes

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