

Tell Me What Love Is:

a study on “LOVE” in early twentieth century Indian women's narratives

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Tell me what love is, what can it be
What is this yearning burning me?
Can I survive it, will I endure?
This is my sickness, is there a cure?
(aria 'voi che sapete' in *The Marriage of Figaro*)

On March 2010, one shocking movie was released in India and has been controversial for a while. The movie, *Love Sex aur Dhoka* (Love Sex and Deceit) is comprised by three stories and one of them was a story of the so-called “honour killing”. The story starts out with the usual 'boy-meets-girl' plot. They fall in love with each other but since they have different social and economic background their love is not accepted especially by the girl's elite and orthodox family. They elope and get married secretly but soon they are brutally murdered by her own brother. The movie was highly acclaimed and recognised as a “realistic cinema”. It shows us “love” is still strictly within the realm and limited to the family system in contemporary India. That is, “love” is accepted only *after* marriage; there is no room for what we have come to accept in Japan or in many western countries of the “cinderella story of love leading to marriage”. The above mentioned movie is just one example, but there are many other incidents that are related to “love” in newspapers almost every day in India. I have wondered how and why a “private” concern, such as “love”, can only be strictly defined within certain system or “public” rule.

Against the historical background in the 1920s, ever since “love” had started to appear in Indian women's narratives, namely memoirs, correspondence, diary and autobiography, representation of “love” has been bound to some norms. Here again, it can be said that private feelings are defined by social norms. This paper will attempt to explore the relationship and the interaction between “love” with social norms and structures in India.

Another objective of this paper is to point out the diversity of representation of “love” in India. Love may be a universal emotion but there is no single form of representation among various cultures. It may differ based on the culture or/and language and may also be changing over time with the transformation of the conception of love. We have been representing love in various forms of literary works, such as poetry, novels, folktales, plays, and memoirs, among others. In her excellent work about the representation of love in South Asia, Francesca Orsini classifies the repertoires through which love has been represented into four categories: first, Sanskrit (centred on *shringara* and *kama*); second, Perso-Arabic (centred on *'ishq* and *muhabbat*); third, an oral repertoire of folk tales and songs in various languages; fourth a devotional one (centred on *prem*). Although it is quite informative and explicit classification, it is still impossible to cover the diversity of representation of “love” in India as a whole. Orsini herself states that these categories are not independent but overlap and combine. We can see many more exceptional cases especially in women's voices that cannot be classified into any of Orsini's four groups.

The case studies that this paper will examine in further detail are from modern Indian women's narratives in which we can see not only women's ideal and

duties, but also their “other” voice, such as new sense of individual worth and emotional life.

I Autobiographical writings in modern India

In the history of Western literature, autobiography has quite a long history. The model of autobiography has emerged in the fifth century and since then various autobiographies have been written. Compared to this history, autobiographical writings in India do not have a long tradition. The genre of autobiography was imported to India from the West, but of course is not limited to western traditional genre. What is known as modern autobiography, namely the autobiography which we have access to India today, is said to have appeared in the nineteenth century.

During this time, a number of young men who received modern Western education were able to access and verse themselves in English literature. They were heavily influenced by the literatures they read, especially in the modern sense of self and of individualism which had not been valued in traditional Indian society. It is frequently mentioned that identities found on caste and religion dominated to such a degree that individual agency and sense of selfhood were marginal to Indian thought and behaviour. In such milieu, where religion, caste and *jati* has been much more valued than the individual, Western literature and culture have emerged with person-oriented value.

Through such modern culture the sense of selfhood had incubated in the thoughts of young educated Indians. It brought to them the expansion of their spiritual

world and inspiration of the sense of self-consciousness. As a result of this new trend, autobiography has become one of the most popular genres in modern India.

In the late nineteenth century, women also started to write about themselves, but it was not a general or common phenomenon seen all over India but limited to the Bengali area. Such Bengali women came from the upper echelon of the social class and were highly educated. This trend then reached the northern part of India around the 1920s to 30s. This was a time when female education had been popularized and female literacy rate significantly rose. In addition to this, the rise of printing technology and transportation had a significant impact on the circulation of women's magazines. Literate women were now able to seek for the space and obtain tools to bring their own voices into the public sphere. Some of them wrote a letter addressing the editor of a magazine and told her own story---mostly miserable-- to ask for advice or support while others wrote what would be a diary and autobiography which would be published later.

II Women's narratives in modern India

In women's narratives, regardless of size and style, what stands out is their struggle to be an ideal Hindu wife. Most of the narratives emphasize how obedient or devoted she is to her husband and in-laws. Furthermore, these narratives have the following common points.

First of all, we can easily find the strong sense of gender awareness in most of the writings. Narrators feel grief and inferiority of being a woman. It has been wide spread thought in Hindu society that to born as a woman means punishment of one's

prior life. In such a circumstance generally a birth of a daughter is, in comparison to son, is an unwelcomed event for a family. This is not a peculiar trend that you see only in conservative people, but it is true even for elite and modern families, for example former Prime Minister Nehru's family, as well. In modern period, the Nehru family has been respected and adored across the country as a political and social leader. Even in such an eminent family the birth of a daughter was unwelcomed. In her autobiography, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the younger sister of Jawaharlal who was independent India's first chancellor, described the time of the birth of her niece Indira. When Indira---who also became President later--- was born, Vijayalakshmi's mother Swarup made a face and just said; "it" has been born¹. Since "it" was not blessed she could not bring herself to announce the birth of a daughter.

Jawaharlal's other younger sister, Krishna, also wrote an autobiography and she bitterly mentions that her mother only loves her son, Jawaharlal. Krishna tells her reader that her birth itself disappointed her mother. In her childhood, Krishna has been ravenous for her mother's affection, but sadly that affection was directed only to her brother². In her narrative, we can see that Krishna slowly begins to cast a cynical eye on her mother with a sense of dissatisfaction. Several women narrators, just like Krishna, write about their mother in a critical tone. This is the second point in common.

Interestingly, this tendency is very different from men's autobiography. According to Judith Walsh, in various autobiographies written by men in modern India, the mother always appears with a lot of affection and beautiful memories³. In women's autobiography, the mother is represented as a slave to convention and often interrupts and intervenes in the narrator's education or career⁴. Others either do not even

mention their mother or briefly mention in few lines. Suniti Devi, a princess of Cooch Bihar, describes her childhood memories in her autobiography which was contributed to a Hindi magazine *Griha Lakshmi* and there she mentions only her father. Similarly, in her diary, political activist Urmila Shastri frequently mentions her father from whom she had learnt many things, but she only says, “my mother also supported my father”⁵ about her mother.

Their narratives show us clearly that the mother was not always admired by her daughters. Since they were modern educated women they may criticize their mother as conservative and backward. At the same time, however, they become very conscious of their inferior gender when they see their mother treat their son with extreme favouritism.

On the contrary, for these women the father or/and elder brother was always adorable and respectable person who is fair, highly-conscientious and a supporter of modern idea. This is the third point in common. Narrators emphasize that they have been influenced by their father /brother's view on modern idea, especially on social reform. This is a very interesting point that their sense of respect and admiration for their husband is no different to that of their father and brother. They respected their husband just like they did their father. They were obedient to their husband just as they were to their brother. It is not clear whether there was “love” for the husband. Since they were always obedient not only to their husband but also to their father, elder brother or other political leaders, they were willing to accept and follow their guidance and order. There is no clear distinct border between their husband and other men since they abide by strict obedience towards all of them. In other words, it is difficult to see their special feeling, such as conjugal “love”, toward their husband.

It has been said by various sacred texts that Hindu woman, especially Hindu wife, should be obedient, virtuous and willing to self-sacrifice. We must understand their efforts to be an ideal wife in terms of the social and religious norms that they value. Their efforts may not be because of their love for their husband but of religious obligation.

To consider a relationship of a couple in those times, we also need to consider the traditional family system. A young bride was taken from one's natal family into a new unknown place and there was the unending drudgery of household chores, which she was supposed to shoulder. In an extended family, household wives were not supposed to talk to their husbands during day-time, especially in the presence of others⁶. Such systems did not allow the intimacy between the husband and wife. Under such strict and compelling norm and social structure, there may be very few chances that “love” can bloom in women's heart toward their husbands.

III Voices of nameless women

Needless to say, there are various types of conjugal and family relationships. The narratives heretofore described are autobiographies written by so-called “elite” women, especially who have joined the Indian independence movement as political and social activists. Their narratives are full of sense of duty but lack raw emotions--- such as sex, love affair, anger, and jealousy. They do not attach importance to their private life but focus on their political activities, such as their experiences in jail or interaction with eminent political leaders. We can recognize them as not “person-centred” narratives but a kind of national history, or “nationalism propaganda”.

By contrast, we can find very different narratives by anonymous women in some Hindi magazines around the 1920s to 30s. Many nameless women wrote letters or small notes to the editor requesting not to specify their name and address, and they often expressed things about themselves, especially their miserable situation, such as domestic cruelty and insecurity, repressed sexuality, or lack of respect toward them. For most women, women's journals and its reader's columns were the first and only place where they could express their own feeling freely and gain some sympathy and support from the editor and readers. Francesca Orsini clearly defines that the women's journals played an important role in introducing and popularizing a notion of the "right to feel" to many non-celebrity women⁷.

Some letters and first-person narratives use the term of *prem* or *pyar*, as love, when they narrate about their emotional life. A young married Kayasta of 16 from Bagarpur wrote in March 1930 about her extramarital affair with her cousin:

I was delivered to one person with poor health. But I love my cousin. He loves me too. I do not want anything but my cousin. Is it crime to go away with him? Can I get remarried with him? I do not want to go with my husband. Tell me what to do? ⁸

A daughter of an officer reveals her premarital affair with her neighbor that continued for couple years:

I love him and I gave my virginity to him. But now I am getting married with other person. Due to that my dharma will be corrupting. I am degrading myself furthermore..... ⁹

Another young wife from Muzaffarnagar seeks advice about her conjugal relationship:

When I got married, I was thirteen years old. After that I met someone and love him. But my

husband got to know our relationship and he hates me now. What can I do?¹⁰

A Brahman widow tells the tale of her eventful life:

My husband's nephew was the person who was only kind to me and loved me. I was weltering in his love and enjoying it. Alas, I wish I could get married with him not my old husband! I have been happy because of the love relationship with him. But God did not forgive this false happiness....¹¹

A widow from Japarpur reveals her illicit affair with her father-in-law. She was approached by him after the death of her husband:

My father in-laws made advances to me and our illicit affair has started. Slowly I start to love him and enjoy the immoral act with him. To enjoy safety, I needed to do good. I mean, my soul was getting dirtier, I did more religious act.¹²

Classifying the representation of “love”, Orsini shows us *prem* was the term representing “romantic love” in modern Indian literature. It was the symbol of an ideal couple or sometimes young educated man and beautiful courtesan. *Prem* became an established ideal by the beginning of the twentieth century¹³. However, as we have seen in the above mentioned women's letters and first-person narratives, we find very few cases of “romantic love” between husband and wife. There is, rather, bold and vivid emotion and sense of individual worth which is not limited to marital relations¹⁴. It seems that they use “love” as a useful tool to justify their behaviour which is forbidden or betraying high morals and/or social norms. Or perhaps they simply confused love with lust.

To further examine the characteristics of anonymous narratives let us take a look at

the elite women's narratives comparatively. Many of these narratives have been published as a book in later years. In their stiff and serious narratives, private concerns such as “love” are hardly represented. For them, to narrate about “love” was a kind of taboo. There is almost no reference to conjugal love, let alone love affairs, in their narrative.

After ten months of their love marriage, Urmila Shastri was sent to jail for her political offense. In her prison diary, which was published later, we cannot find her affection for her newly married husband. Krishna also married for love but she also hardly mentions about her husband in her autobiography. In her book of 170 pages, only two pages are devoted to a description of the memory with her husband. In such narratives, however, there is one exceptional voice related to love. It is written by Sunita Devi and she recites about the moment she met with her husband:

It may not so ill-deserved that I am writing this, we fell in love madly with each other just at the moment we met. ¹⁵

Another characteristic of anonymous narratives is that most of the narrators express her illicit “love” within the family --- such as with their cousin, nephew, father in-laws, and brother in-laws. Since their sexuality has been strictly controlled within the patriarchal system, women were bound to inside the family with no access to the outside world. This is particularly interesting because it is contrast to the male “prerogative”, as Vasudha Dalmia shows us through her analysis of modern Hindi novel, to quest for love and satisfaction outside the house freely. It can be said that even in terms of “illicit love”, women's emotions were contained and did not extend beyond the family system.

IV The space for “love”

Through the various women's narratives we can confirm the social bound which did not allow for much in terms of women's private sphere of emotions and sense of individuation. Some of the women were so bound to traditional norms that they could not expose their emotions freely, while some told the tale with frankness about their love affairs but only with their face hidden. The system, such as social values and practices, defined the private sphere and it has been continuously utilized to negotiate the space for “love”. What we need to realize is that the system is not imperial, rather, that even though the strict social backdrop in those times called for absolute obedience and virtue, there were in fact voices that challenged the system in the modern period. Such narratives told by faceless and nameless women illustrate the other dimension of women's lives in the modern period which has much value to contribute to the cultural history of India.

Let us now go back to what has been mentioned in the beginning of the paper, about the movie *Love Sex aur Dhokha*. This movie shows us the space for love in Indian society is still being socially forbidden. Moreover, it is also apparent that the movie accentuates a tacit convention or unwritten code to light; in Indian society “love” is not just allowed, but that also it causes tragedy and even death. For some people, since “love” especially outside of the family system kills family honour, it should die down but the film and the response to it show us that there are other voices that go against such code. We can find this kind of voice in another representation, or in one novel. Six months before the movie, the novel about “love leading to marriage” has been published and was highly acclaimed, especially among the young generation. The novel, *2 States: the story of my marriage* is a fiction, but it is said to be inspired from a real story of the

author and his wife and there are plans of making a movie based on the novel¹⁶.

Although, as Orsini says, the space for love in Indian society still lies mostly in the literary or filmic imagination, we cannot dismiss the public opinion towards such imaginations and movements in people's daily lives or the real world. The research on love marriage has been conducted by leading researcher Dr. Perveez Mody. Her original and incisive work is based on many case studies, which include love marriage couples in contemporary Delhi¹⁷. Her work demonstrates how law, publicity and kinship/community norms in north India shape the lives of individuals. The increase and promotion of such research imply that not only the representation of love is changing, but reality is transforming as well. All of us have the eternal yearning to search for love, the meaning of love. Of course, this is a never-ending quest but with intrigue, fascination, and humility, my future work shall be the continuous conquest to search for the meaning of "love" and in particular how the representations of love and reality will link or connect in the space of "love".

1 Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 1979 *The Scope of Happiness* (Calcutta: The signet press), p.57.

2 Krishna Hutheesing 1943 *With No Regrets: an autobiography* (Bombay: Padma Publications Ltd.), p.8.

3 Judith Walsh 1983 *Growing up in British India; Indian autobiographers on childhood and education under the Raj* (New York: Holmes&Meier), pp.18-19.

4 See, Charshi Devi, 'Mere Jivan Ka Ek Adhyay' in *Stri Darpan* 1920 Jun:320-324, Duhkhini Bala, 'Sarala Ek Vidhva Ki Aatmajivni', in *Katadesh* 2005 March:16, Krishna Hutheesing 1943:54 etc.

5 Urmiladevi Shastri 1980 *Karagar* (Delhi: Tamara and Sons), p.38.

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- 6 Francesca Orsini(ed), 2007 *Love in South Asia* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press),p.30.
- 7 Francesca Orsini, 2002 *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press),p.275.
- 8 'Chitti-Patri', in *Chand* 1930 March:860-862.
- 9 'Chitti-Patri', in *Chand* 1930 December:251-252.
- 10 'Chitti-Patri', in *Chand* 1930 December :253-259.
- 11 'Main Patit Kaise Huyi?', in *Chand* 1926 January: pp. 273-281.
- 12 'Chitti-Patri', in *Griha Lakshmi* c.1927 Asharh: pp. 188-190.
- 13 Orsini, 2007 : pp. 30-33.
- 14 Interestingly, according to Tapan Raychaudhury, there is romantic and passionate view of matrimony in some of young Indian husbands' memoirs. (Tapan Raychaudhuri, 2000 'Love in a Colonial Climate: Marriage, sex and romance in Nineteenth-Century Bengal' in *Modern Asian Studies* 34.2: pp.362-363).
- 15 Sunita Devi, 1925 'Ek Bhraratiya Maharani Ki Atma Katha' in *Griha Lakshmi* c.1925 Asharh : pp. 169-170.
- 16 Chetan Bhagat, 2009 *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (New Delhi: Rupa&Co.).
- 17 See, Perveez Mody 'Kidnapping, elopement and abduction: an ethnography of love-marriage in Delhi' in Francesca Orsini(ed), 2007 *Love in South Asia*(New Delhi: Cambridge University Press) and Mody 2008, *The Intimate State: Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi* (New Delhi:Routledge).