

## 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)<sup>1</sup> is composed of three stories and one of them is a story of a 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 backgrounds, their love is not accepted especially by the girl’s elite, orthodox family. They elope and marry secretly, but they soon are brutally murdered by the bride’s own brother. The movie was highly acclaimed and recognised as ‘realistic cinema’.

It shows us that ‘love’ is still strictly within the realm of and limited to the family system in contemporary India. That is, ‘love’ is acceptable only *after* marriage; there is no room for what we have come to acknowledge in Japan or in many Western countries as the ‘Cinderella story of love leading to marriage’. The above-mentioned movie is just one example, but there are many other incidents 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 a certain system and be subject to ‘public’ rule.

Against the historical background of the 1920s, ever since ‘love’ started to appear in Indian women’s narratives, namely memoirs, correspondences, diaries, and autobiographies, representations of ‘love’ have been bound by certain 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’ and the social norms and structures of India.

Another objective of this paper is to point out the diversity of representations 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 culture or/and language and may also change over time with transformation of the concept 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 on the representation of love in South Asia, Francesca Orsini classifies the repertoires through which love has been represented into four categories: first, Sanskritic (centred

<sup>1</sup> Dibakar Banerjee, Director, *Love, Sex aur Dhoka*, 2010.

on *shringara* and *kama*); second, Perso-Arabic (centred on *'ishq* and *muhabbat*); third, the oral repertoire of folk tales and songs in various languages; and fourth, the devotional theme (centred on *prem*). Although it is quite informative and explicit as a classification, it is still impossible to cover the diversity of representations 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 examines in further detail are from modern Indian women's narratives in which we can see not only the ideal of woman and her duties, but also her 'other' voice, such as a 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 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 is of course not limited to the Western traditional genre. What is known as modern autobiography, namely the autobiography to which we have access in 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 literature 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 founded 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 a milieu, where religion, caste, and *jati* have been much more valued than the individual, Western literature and culture have emerged with person-oriented values.

Through such modern culture, a sense of selfhood incubated in the thoughts of young educated Indians. It brought to them an expansion of their spiritual world and inspired in them a sense of self-awareness. 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 echelons of society 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 was popularized and the female literacy rate rose significantly. 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 the space and obtain the tools to bring their own voices into the public sphere. Some of them wrote letters addressing the editors of magazines and told their own stories—mostly miserable—to ask for advice or support, while others wrote what would be diaries and autobiographies later published.

## 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 a strong sense of gender awareness in most of the writings. The narrators feel the grief and inferiority of being a woman. It has been widespread thought in Hindu society that to be born as a woman means punishment for one's previous life. In such circumstances, the birth of a daughter is generally, in comparison to the birth of a son, an unwelcome event for a family. This is not a peculiar trend that you see only in conservative people, but is true even for elite and modern families, for example, former prime minister Nehru's family, as well. In the 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 unwelcome. 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 that 'it' had been born.<sup>2</sup> 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 loved her son, Jawaharlal. Krishna tells her readers that her birth itself disappointed her mother. In her childhood, Krishna craved her mother's affection, but sadly, that affection was directed only to her brother.<sup>3</sup> 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 autobiographies. According to Judith Walsh, in various autobiographies written by men in modern India, the mother is always shown with a lot of affection and beautiful memories.<sup>4</sup> In women's autobiographies, the mother is represented as a slave to convention who often interrupts and intervenes in the narrator's education or career.<sup>5</sup> Others either do not even mention their mother or briefly mention her in a few lines. Suniti Devi, a princess of Cooch Behar, 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 of her mother, she only says that 'my mother also supported my father'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness* (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1979), p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Krishna Hutheesing, *With No Regrets: An Autobiography* (Bombay: Padma Publications Ltd, 1943.), p. 8

<sup>4</sup> Judith Walsh, *Growing Up in British India; Indian Autobiographers on Childhood and Education under the Raj* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983), pp. 18-19.

<sup>5</sup> See Charshi Devi, 'Mere Jivan Ka Ek Adhyay' in *Sri Darpan* (1920 Jun), pp. 320-324; Duhkhini Bala, 'Sarila Ek Vidhya Ki Aatmajivni', in *Katadesh* (March 2005), p. 16; Krishna Hutheesing (1943), p. 54; etc.

<sup>6</sup> Urmiladevi Shastri, *Karagar* (Delhi: Tamara and Sons, 1980), p. 38.

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 sons with extreme favouritism.

On the other hand, for these women, the father or/and elder brother was always an adorable, respected person who is fair, highly conscientious, and a supporter of modern ideas. This is the third point in common. The narrators emphasize that they have been influenced by their father's or brother's views on modern ideas, especially social reform. It is a very interesting point that their sense of respect and admiration for their husbands is no different to that for their fathers and brothers. They respected their husbands just like they did their fathers. They were obedient to their husbands just as they were to their brothers. It is not clear whether there was 'love' for the husband. Since they were always obedient not only to their husbands but also to their fathers, elder brothers, or other political leaders, they were willing to accept and follow their guidance and orders. There is no clear distinction between their husbands and other men since they abide in 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 in various sacred texts that the Hindu woman, especially the 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 husbands but of religious obligation.

To consider the relationship between a couple in those times, we also need to consider the traditional family system. A young bride was taken from her natal family into a new unknown place and there was the unending drudgery of household chores, which she was supposed to shoulder. In the extended family, household wives were not supposed to talk to their husbands during the daytime, especially in the presence of others.<sup>7</sup> Such systems did not allow intimacy between the husband and wife. Under such a strict social structure and such compelling norms, there may be very few chances for 'love' toward her husband to bloom in a woman's heart.

### **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 those who have joined the Indian independence movement as political and social activists. Their narratives are full of a sense of duty but lack raw emotions — such as sex, love affairs, 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 interactions with eminent political leaders. We can recognize them not as 'person-centred' narratives but as a kind of national history, or 'nationalism propaganda'.

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<sup>7</sup> Francesca Orsini (ed), *Love in South Asia* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 30.

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 that their name and address be withheld, 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 like *Griha Lakshmi* and *Chand* and its readers' columns were the first and only place where they could express their own feelings freely and gain some sympathy and support from the editor and readers.

It is said that *Griha Lakshmi*, appearing in 1909, was the first magazine edited by a woman and it aimed to promote female education and emancipation of women.<sup>8</sup> Most of the articles of this journal insisted on duties and ideals for Indian woman. It supported images of the traditional woman, such as obedience, self-sacrifice, and virtue. *Chand* was the most famous monthly



Heading of the editorial section of *Chand*,  
Sep. 1926



Heading of the readers' column of *Chand*,  
Feb. 1929



Heading of the readers' column of *Griha Lakshmi*, c. Apr. 1927

<sup>8</sup> Orsini pointed out that the editor, Mrs. Gopaldevi, was a name only and in fact, Grihalakshmi was edited by a Mr. Thakur Shrinat Singh. Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (2002), p. 262.

magazine for the middle classes from the 1920s to 30s in northern India. In the first issue, which appeared in 1922, the editor Ramrakh Singh Sahgal declared the uplift of Indian women, but *Chand* did not limit itself to issues concerning women but also those social and political. As Francesca Orsini says, in size and content, *Chand* surpassed all previous women's journals.<sup>9</sup> Added to that, we can see that compared to other journals, *Chand* provided more space to its readers' columns. Francesca Orsini clearly claims that the women's journals played an important role in introducing and popularizing the notion of the 'right to feel' among many non-celebrity women.<sup>10</sup>

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

*I was delivered to someone in 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 marry my cousin? I do not want to be with my husband anymore. Tell me what to do!*<sup>11</sup>

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

*I love him and I gave my virginity to him. But now, I am getting married to another man. Due to that my dharma will be corrupted. I am degrading myself furthermore.*<sup>12</sup>

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 fell in love with him. Now, my husband has discovered our relationship and hates me. What can I do?*<sup>13</sup>

A Brahman widow tells the tale of her eventful life:

*My husband's nephew was the only person who was kind and loved me. Alas, I wish I could get married to him, not my old husband! I have been happy because of our relationship. But God did not bless this false happiness.*<sup>14</sup>

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

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<sup>9</sup> Orsini (2002), p. 267

<sup>10</sup> Orsini (2002), p. 275.

<sup>11</sup> 'Chitti-Patri', in *Chand* (March 1930), pp. 860-862.

<sup>12</sup> 'Chitti-Patri', in *Chand* (December 1930), pp. 251-252.

<sup>13</sup> 'Chitti-Patri', in *Chand* (December 1930), pp. 253-259.

<sup>14</sup> 'Main Patit Kaise Huyi?', in *Chand* (January 1926), pp. 273-281.

*My father-in-law made advances to me and our illicit affair began. Eventually, I started to love him, but I needed to do good to enjoy the immoral act with him in a more safe and sound manner. I mean, the less clean my soul became, the more religious acts I needed to conduct.*<sup>15</sup>

Classifying the representation of 'love', Orsini shows us that *prem* was the term representing 'romantic love' in modern Indian literature. It was the symbol of an ideal couple or sometimes a young educated man and beautiful courtesan. *Prem* became an established ideal by the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> 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 a husband and wife. There is, rather, bold and vivid emotions and a sense of individual worth which is not limited to marital relations.<sup>17</sup> It seems that they used 'love' as a useful tool to justify their behaviour which was forbidden or betrayed 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 comparative look at the elite women's narratives. Many of these narratives were published as books in later years. In their stiff and serious narratives, private concerns such as 'love' are hardly represented. For them, to talk about love was a kind of taboo. There is almost no reference to conjugal love, let alone love affairs, in their narratives.

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

*It may not be so unfitting that I am writing this; we fell in love madly with each other right at the moment we met.*<sup>18</sup>

Another characteristic of anonymous narratives is that most of the narrators express their illicit 'love' within the family — such as with their cousin, nephew, father-in-law, and brother-in-law. Since their sexuality was strictly controlled within the patriarchal system, women were bound to the interior of the family with no access to the outside world. This is particularly interesting because it is in contrast to the male 'prerogative', as Vasudha Dalmia shows us through her analysis of the modern Hindi novel, to freely seek love and satisfaction outside the house. It

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<sup>15</sup> 'Chitti-Patri', in *Griha Lakshmi* (c. Asharh 1927), pp. 188-190.

<sup>16</sup> Orsini (2007), pp. 30-33.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, according to Tapan Raychaudhuri, there is a romantic and passionate view of matrimony in some young Indian husbands' memoirs. (Tapan Raychaudhuri, 'Love in a Colonial Climate: Marriage, Sex and Romance in Nineteenth-Century Bengal' in *Modern Asian Studies* 34.2 (2000): pp. 362-363.

<sup>18</sup> Sunita Devi, 'Ek Bhraratiya Maharani Ki Atma Katha' in *Griha Lakshmi* (c. Asharh 1925): pp. 169-170.

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 bounds 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 tied to traditional norms that they could not expose their emotions freely, while some told their tales of love affairs with frankness but only with their faces hidden. The system comprising 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, 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 in contributing to the cultural history of India.

Let us now go back to what has been mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the movie *Love, Sex aur Dhokha*. This movie shows us that the space for love in Indian society is still socially forbidden. Moreover, it is also apparent that the movie brings the tacit convention or unwritten code to light; that in Indian society, 'love' is not only forbidden, it also causes tragedy and even death. For some people, since 'love', especially outside the family system, kills the family honour, it should never flourish, but the film and the response to it show us that there are other voices that go against this code. We can find this kind of voice in another representation, or in a certain novel. Six months before the release of the movie, a novel about 'love leading to marriage' was 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 by the real story of the author and his wife, and there are plans to make a movie based on the novel.<sup>19</sup>

Although, as Orsini says, the space for love in Indian society still lies mostly in the literary or filmic imagination, we cannot dismiss public opinion of such imaginings and movements in people's daily lives or the real world. Research on love marriage has been conducted by leading researcher Dr. Perveen Mody. Her original and incisive work is based on many case studies, which include love marriage couples in contemporary Delhi.<sup>20</sup> Her work demonstrates how law,



Portrait of Maharani Sunita Devi *Griha Lakshmi*,  
c. Asharh 1925: p. 168.

<sup>19</sup> Chetan Bhagat, 2009 *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2009).

<sup>20</sup> See Perveen Mody, 'Kidnapping, Elopement and Abduction: an ethnography of Love-Marriage in Delhi' in Francesca Orsini (ed.), *Love in South Asia* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Mody, *The Intimate State: Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2008).



publicity, and kinship/community norms in north India shape the lives of individuals. The increase and promotion of such research imply that not only is the representation of love changing, but that reality is in a state of transformation as well. All of us have the eternal yearning to search for love and its meaning. Of course, this is a never-ending quest but with intrigue, fascination, and humility, my future work shall be the continuous pursuit for the meaning of 'love' and in particular, how representations of love and reality link or connect in the space of 'love'.