

Adjustment is the Key

Postmarital Romance in Indian Popular Fiction

by
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A RATHER paradoxical picture seems to emerge from the sociological literature on popular or mass culture. On the one hand it is claimed that commercial interests manipulate public taste to create a demand for the product, and on the other, that the entertainment industry is ultimately obliged to give the public what it demands. Again, it is maintained that popular culture is a vehicle for the propagation of society's dominant ideology; and, on the contrary, that it is the locus of subaltern resistance to that ideology. Perhaps the truth lies in between.

Romantic Fiction

Romantic fiction is a recognised genre of popular culture, which has two notable and distinguishing characteristics. It is mostly authored by women and it is mostly consumed by women. These two features pertain, however, within the wider social frame of the publishing industry which, here and abroad, is largely managed and controlled by men.

The producers of romantic fiction are to some extent able to create and manipulate popular taste. The spectacular success of the Mills and Boon publishing syndicate, using well tried formulae but seeking a distinct product image through aggressive marketing techniques, is a case in point. Market and audience research is an essential input into this success. On the other hand, to be commercially viable, romantic fiction must give the audience what it "wants". For obvious reasons, publishers of romantic fiction



are very sensitive to audience response, and have firm ideas about what the audience can "take", or how "far" the author can afford to go, for instance, in the description of erotic scenes. They assiduously encourage reader feedback through various means.

The very existence of a genre of romantic fiction directed almost exclusively to a female audience seems to testify to an existing feminine need for fantasisation on the themes of love, sex and marriage, and to the positive value of the idea of "romance", in India as in the West. On the other hand, the male need for romance is assumed to be inconsequential. Or, to be more precise, romance for women is believed to be in complementary distribution with pornography for men.

Secondly, it seems clear that romantic fiction can and does serve as

a vehicle for the propagation of dominant ideologies. In particular, it actively creates and reproduces gender stereotypes.

Courtship and romance in Indian society can occur after marriage, as well as before, and this is what every young girl entering marriage hopes and longs for. Indeed, a contemporary mode favoured by modern city girls is to proceed to "fall in love" through a series of carefully planned and cautiously encouraged meetings, outings and dates, after the formal, parentally arranged, engagement.

A girl's preoccupation with romance after marriage is not, of course, merely a sentimental matter -it has important political implications. Though it is widely recognised that a young bride's position in her husband's household improves considerably once she has a (male) child, sensitive ethnographies have also noted the various strategies that women consciously employ to win their husbands away from loyalty to sisters and mothers or, in some cases, from co-wives. Of course, sexuality is the special weapon of wives.

Wicked mothers-in-law recognise this and, in turn, or so it is alleged in some of the texts that we have been reading, try to limit the opportunities for intimate physical contact between husband and wife to the bare minimum. A favourite ruse, if these stories are to be believed, is to have the husband's sisters share the same room as the married couple. In any case, given general conditions of over-crowding,

lack of privacy must be a perennial problem for many Indian couples, reducing lovemaking to a hasty and rather furtive affair.

It is not surprising that the romantic fantasies of middle class Indian women should focus as much on the problematics of love after marriage as on the vicissitudes of courtship. Interestingly, psychologist Sudhir Kakar draws the same conclusion from his analysis of more highbrow literary works:

“What these novels only hint at and which becomes an overwhelming issue in fiction (and patients) from (and of) the middle-and upper-middle class social milieu is the profound yearning of a wife, as a woman, for a missing intimacy with the husband - as a man. Generally fated for disappointment, the fantasy of constituting a ‘couple’, not in opposition to the rest of the extended family but within this wider network, is a dominant theme running through women’s lives, actual and fictional.”

This “two-person universe” of the married couple, says Kakar, is the real *sasural* “to which a girl looks forward after marriage and which even a married woman keeps on writing and rewriting in the hidden vaults of the imagination.”

Twenty Tales of ‘True’ Romance

With these generalities in mind we now look at the way in which love between the sexes is handled in a set of romantic short stories published for the most part in the English language women’s magazine, *Woman’s Era*, over the course of a year (1988-89). Our sample was rather a small one -only 20 stories in all, so our conclusions must be regarded as tentative. Nonetheless, they are suggestive, and further reading of such texts tends to confirm our first impressions. We then pick up for more detailed analysis some of the love stories (specifically tales of love after marriage) that appeared in a recent

issue of the same journal, *Woman’s Era* (May 2, 1990).

But first, a word about our chief source, *Woman’s Era*. Correctly or not, *Woman’s Era* claims to be “the largest selling women’s magazine in English”, in India. A locally produced fortnightly, it is one of a chain of women, children, and family oriented magazines in English and some Indian languages. *Woman’s Era* announces that it “carries women-oriented fiction, articles of general interest as well as on family affairs, exotic food recipes (and) latest trends in fashions and films.” It also has a regular personal column, which deals specially with problems of mate selection, marital adjustment, intrafamily relations, pre and postmarital affairs, problems of tobacco, alcohol and drug addiction; a regular write-in health advice column, featuring many queries on female disorders and sexual matters; and a write-in beauty advice column.

The stories we examined fall almost evenly into two distinct categories, each with a characteristic pattern of narrative development. On the one hand are tales of courtship; on the other, tales of conjugal relations, that is, of romance after marriage. It is here that one senses an important quantitative and qualitative difference from the Western romantic fiction which these tales superficially resemble, and where the overriding preoccupation is the narrative sequence of events from boy-meets-girl to marriage-and-living-happily-ever-after. The sheer volume of stories here of conjugal relations confirms that romance after marriage is a major preoccupation, anxiety and subject of fantasy for Indian women.

Like folktales, fairy stories and myths, romantic fiction has a strongly formulaic character. Tales of courtship are narratives of a boy-girl relationship from first encounter through a series of crises to a happy ending in the marriage of the chief protagonists.

Alternatively, one of the protagonists may end up marrying some other person - an old flame, for instance; or the relationship might break up.

In this set of stories, it was interesting that only about half of the boy-girl romantic encounters ultimately led to the marriage of the two protagonists. The remaining half were almost evenly distributed between the other two outcomes. One is tempted to conclude that courtship as an institution is regarded as inherently problematic, and certainly not as a necessary preliminary to a happy marriage, even for the Westernised middle class readers of these romantic stories. The personal columns of the same magazine were also rather equivocal on this question; they neither actively approve nor actively disapprove “love” that is, self arranged marriages. They also warn that if a courtship cannot be consummated in marriage before the girl is 20, she would be advised to agree to a parentally arranged marriage before it is too late.

The tales of the vicissitudes of love after marriage are of interest because of the wider issues they raise concerning love, sex and marriage.

The general thrust of the ethnographic literature on family relations in India suggests that the conjugal relationship develops only at the expense of the solidarity of the joint family, that the bride is inevitably pitted against the mother-in-law for control over the son. However, in our opinion the primary source of marital tension does not lie in the supposed contradiction of the conjugal relation (or nuclear family values) versus the values of the joint family. No matter what sociologists and psychologists might like to say, the romantic fiction of these women’s magazines insists on the inner consistency - the non-contradiction - of conjugality and joint family values. In these stories, contradiction is located elsewhere - specifically, in the woman’s assertion of her individuality and personality,

and/or in her failure to compromise when marital problems become manifest. It is this, above all, that threatens the stability and endurance of a marriage. The stories project divorce as the worst disaster for a woman, except death. Readers sometimes sense that this is the “moral” that underlies the majority of the stories. As one reader put it recently in a letter to the editor:

“Yours is one of the few magazines I consider worth buying these days. Filled as it is with pages which reveal many facets of life, one rarely skips even a line. However, one thing I object to in your magazine is the fact that many a time the advice given and the moral behind the stories is that it is a woman’s duty to sacrifice...

“I wish to differ from this attitude of yours and with good reason. I do agree that to an extent everyone must make a few compromises to maintain a harmonious family life. However, where giving up one’s dignity and to a certain extent one’s pride is concerned, I consider ‘sacrifice’ to be demeaning and degrading to women.” (*Woman’s Era*, May 2, 1990).

The stories of marital relations usually begin with a married couple who are facing problems in their relationship. An event occurs or a mediator is involved to give the story a new turn. If mediation is successful, the couple are reconciled (presumably to live happily ever after). Occasionally, the mediation fails, and the marriage breaks down. Very occasionally, the story is left tantalisingly open ended.

A strained relationship between husband and wife can be manifested in open conflict - the wife does or wants to do something that the husband does not approve - or it may be the outcome of a feeling of anxiety or insecurity on the part of the wife.

Sources of Marital Tension

Open conflict can occur over a number of issues. Some of the examples that came up in our texts:

- The husband may disapprove of



the wife’s friends, and forbid her to meet them;

- the wife may wish to continue in her job after marriage, even if it entails living in a different city, whereas her husband may expect that she resign her job and join him;

- a wife may be unwilling to accompany her husband when he is transferred to a distant and unsalubrious place;

- a long-suffering wife may insist on taking a holiday in a relatively glamorous locale, contrary to her conservative husband’s wishes; or

- a wife may feel offended when her husband, without consulting her, withdraws a large sum of money from their joint account to buy a car.

And so on. There is a conflict of will or interest between husband and wife. Either may be self evidently in the right, or each of them may have a point. The crucial factor in turning a mere difference of opinion into a marital crisis is what is called in popular parlance an ego hassle.

Anxiety arises from a number of sources, including the wife’s feeling that her husband cares more for his mother and sisters than for her. Childlessness is a major source of feelings of insecurity and

worthlessness. So, too, is a husband’s real or imagined attraction to another woman. A woman may also feel vulnerable on account of a past indiscretion: she is afraid her husband will reject her if he finds out about it. Incidentally, this latter is a problem that regularly crops up in the personal columns too. The wife feels anxious and wonders if she should tell her husband about some past relationship. She is usually advised against this, unless the husband is likely to find out otherwise. Significantly, a husband’s premarital indiscretions do not make him feel anxious. Rather, once again, they make the wife feel vulnerable, suspecting that he must still be in love with his old girlfriend.

Having set up a situation of conflict, the narrative now seeks its resolution. Sometimes, the mediation is almost effortless: for instance, a very minor incident or gesture persuades an anxious wife that her suspicions are unfounded and that her husband loves her best and not his mother after all. Or a supposed affair is revealed as a perfectly innocent relationship. But, usually, it requires the mediation of a third person, or a dramatic event to set the relationship back on course. Occasionally, the mediation fails and

the story concludes unhappily. Or perhaps the story is open ended.

Let us look at some typical examples from a recent issue of the same journal. Quite coincidentally, the first two concern women called Sunanda. In the first, Sunanda, an unusually beautiful and talented girl, used to getting her own way, was bitterly disappointed after marriage to a handsome and well qualified man, Jay. He remained preoccupied, withdrawn and uncommunicative despite all Sunanda's efforts to be pleasing. Unable or too proud to confide her problems in anyone, and perhaps hoping to provoke Jay into a positive demonstration of affection, Sunanda announced her intention to take up a job as headmistress of a primary school in a distant town. Though Jay was clearly upset at this, he did not try to dissuade her. Sunanda began to suspect that he must be having a clandestine extramarital affair.

Sunanda had barely joined her new job when she found herself pregnant. She did not inform her husband but determined to bring up her son as best she could. It was at this point that she was called in to handle a difficult child, son of a divorcee, whose severe behavioural problems seemed to be attributable to the fact that he was missing his father. Though the child's mother had been the victim of dowry harassment, even to the point of fearing for her life, her son's maladjustment had now convinced her that her family had unnecessarily rushed her into getting a divorce: "My husband would perhaps have changed. At least the child would have felt secure if he saw both his parents together, even if they fought occasionally." Realising that she and her own child might one day be in the same predicament, Sunanda returned home and confronted her husband with the news of her pregnancy: he appeared to be moved and excited. She then demanded an explanation for his indifference and prised from him the

story of his betrayal, earlier, by a college sweetheart. In due course Jay had come to love Sunanda though he had married her "only to make his mother happy", but he had hesitated to openly express and acknowledge his feelings for fear of being betrayed once again. He now begged Sunanda for forgiveness, and promised to make amends.

The turning point in this story comes when Sunanda returns to her husband, bent on getting to the root of his seeming indifference to her and - even at the cost of her pride - effecting a reconciliation for die sake of the unborn child.

This type of mediation is a very common one. A third person, accidentally encountered or deliberately sought out, tells his or her own story. The protagonist identifies with the first person narrator and accepts the advice implicitly or explicitly proffered by that person's comparable experience. The case just cited is somewhat unusual in that the unconscious mediator (the problem child's mother) is in a sense of a lower social status than Sunanda, that is, she has come to her as a supplicant for help and guidance. More often, the mediator is in a position of relative authority, an older person whose real personal history was until then unknown to the protagonist. For instance, a young woman, whose marriage is threatened by her careerism, learns that her unambitious mother had once forsaken a scholarship abroad for the sake of her family. The mediator may be an older friend or confidante whose life story reveals unexpected similarities to that of the protagonist. Or it may be a person in a position of authority. In one story, the case where the young woman was unwilling to resign her job after marriage and go to live with her husband, the young woman's boss revealed the tragedy of his own life arising from similar circumstances, and urged her to join her husband. Or the mediator may

simply be a person of the opposite sex, for instance, the husband's best friend, who resorts to a ruse to make the woman jealous and get the young couple together again. In one case of a failed mediation, the mediator was a child. Perhaps this was the reason why the distressed wife could not accept the advice proffered. This was the case of the other Sunanda, the one who died of a "broken heart" Sunanda was exquisitely beautiful and vain of her good looks which she took enormous pains to preserve. She was therefore dismayed to discover, after many years of childless marriage, that her husband had become attracted to a widow, a mother of two boys, whom he used to tutor in the evenings. One day she sent a favourite nephew to report on the other woman. "No, she's not at all beautiful", reported the nephew. "But she looks so nice even in her faded ~~avi~~ and with hair flying all over her face... And ... uncle sort of came alive there... He looked so different... happy... If perhaps you tried to become more like that lady, uncle will talk and laugh with you as well..." As the aunt slapped the boy for his frankness, he repressed a final comment: "Dear aunt You have spent a lifetime tending your looks when the time would have been more worthily spent intending your mind and spirit. You beautified your body and neglected your soul. It is the latter which lasts and the former is as shortlived as the morning dew or a blade of summer grass." Shortly afterwards, the aunt died -in the little boy's opinion, of a broken heart.

Clearly, it is not enough for an example to be set or advice offered: the lesson has to be internalised and acted upon. In fact, it requires compromise, even sacrifice, on the part of the woman, for the higher goal of a happy marriage. In one open ended story, a happy ending is a possibility. Here, the mediator is the protagonist's younger sister - unambitious, homely, and happily married to a member of the Indian army's Armoured Corps. Her

moral superiority over her greedy and ambitious elder sister shines through the text. Ultimately, she advises her sister to seek help from the husband's parents, and the suggestion is that her advice might well bring about a happy outcome. Incidentally, this is one of the several stories that demonstrate the principle that conjugal relations flourish in harmony with good relations with in-laws, or, more specifically, good relations between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

In almost all the stories we examined, the mediator - by positive or negative example or by good advice - provides the impetus for the reconciliation of the estranged couple. There was just one case where the example of the mediator, in this case the girl's grandmother, inspires an unhappily married woman to seek a divorce from her brutal and unfaithful husband. The case stands out as quite unusual.

Sometimes it is not a human agent but a dramatic event that marks a turning point in the narrative and shocks the protagonists into a more realistic understanding of their true position and of their feelings for each other. The event often has a melodramatic quality, as in the story of Brinda Devi.

Brinda Devi had always resented her marriage to the "plain and staid" Narendranath which put an end to her flirtation with a rich, jetsetting playboy. She was reluctant to undertake motherhood, too, and conspicuously disliked her only child, Janaki. When the time came for Janaki's marriage, she even refused to part with a portion of her jewels for the girl's dowry. Overwhelmed with resentment at the mere suggestion, she carelessly failed to prevent Janaki accidentally consuming poison. The girl was taken to hospital, and her father collapsed with shock at the news. At this point, "Brinda Devi's veneer of indifference was shattered... For the first time in her comfortable existence, Brinda Devi was

exposed to cruel reality. It was forcefully brought home to her that except for the two who were struggling for life in separate hospital beds, she had no one else in the world. Without them, she had no life." In a dramatic gesture, she sold off her precious gold bangles to pay her husband's medical expenses, gifted her jewels to her daughter on her wedding day, and was reconciled at once with both husband and daughter.

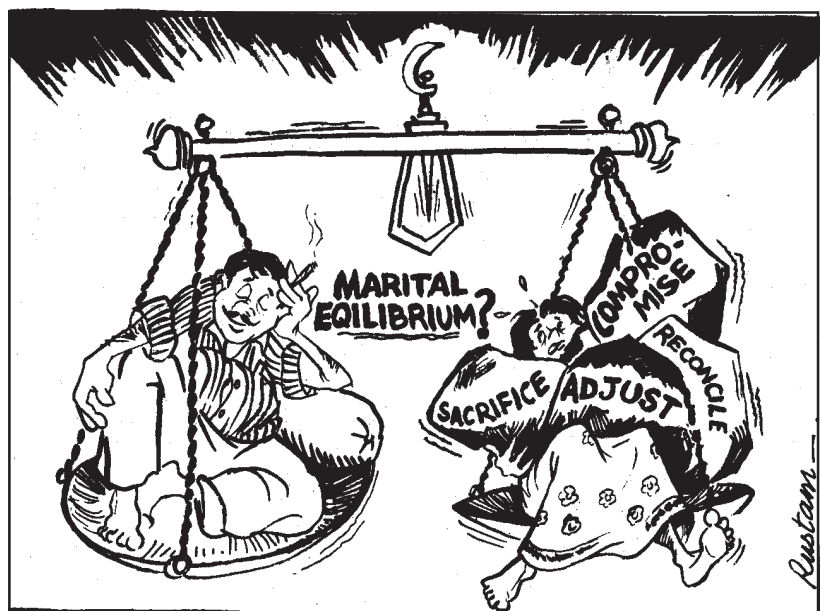
But wives were not always shown in such a poor light in these stories. On the contrary, husbands were very often shown at fault. They were either too weak and thus dominated by their mothers or too authoritarian, for instance, monitoring all the wife's social contacts. Quite often, the husband's grievances appear unreasonable: the expectation that a wife resign her job after marriage, or that he can withdraw the wife's earnings from their joint account without consulting her; or that his extramarital affairs would not adversely affect his family life.

But, wheresoever the fault resided - with the husband, with the wife, with both or with neither - the reconciliation was brought about in the overwhelming number of cases of

marital tension by the wife making compromises - "adjusting", as the Indian English expression has it. On the other hand, marital breakdown was the outcome of the wife's failure to make compromises. Occasionally, both husband and wife climbed down, and occasionally, the husband was the one to make the compromise, but on the whole the "adjustment" was asymmetrical on the part of the wife.

The overall consistency of this solution to a marital crisis suggests that a wife's assertion of her will, autonomy and personality, right or wrong, against her husband, is the primary source of marital tension. Problems with in-laws are merely secondary. How is resolution effected?

In cases where the wife has left her husband (usually to live with her parents), she unconditionally returns to him. An important motivation in this return is the interests of the children. A wife may be required to change her character or modify her habits. A wife is expected to learn to overlook her husband's faults, including infidelity, and to realise that she would be infinitely worse off without him. She is also often expected to curb her career ambitions in the higher interests of domestic accord, especially when that



ambition requires separation from her spouse. She should not seek to compete, directly or indirectly, with her husband. Working wives are not necessarily disapproved of, but clinging to economic independence for its own sake can be construed as an act of defiance.

In contrast with the tales of courtship, the fictional tales of conjugal relations almost always end happily - that is, with the reconciliation of the estranged couple.

True Life Stories?

Woman's Era also regularly carried a number of exemplary tales of failed relationships. Properly speaking, these are a different genre, being ostensibly "true life stories" volunteered by readers. Though the magazine requires a declaration from the authors that "the story is based on facts", the tales have nonetheless a rather formulaic quality and the language is markedly stereotyped. The storyline is preempted by the blurb: "Are you a divorcee... And wish you'd not gone into it?" This series, which is open to both men and women, aims at presenting before the readers the causes that can lead to breakdown of marriage and divorce, so that they can take care of their own lives and ensure a happy married life.

The few stories of failed marriages that we examined were telling, though not conclusive. In the first case, significantly entitled "Towards loneliness and misery", an employed woman does her best to adjust to her more orthodox husband and in-laws. She gives up her hobbies - painting and penfriends - and tries not to resent her reduced personal spending money (since her husband gives all his salary to his mother), and to tolerate her husband's persistent demands for sex. "I wanted a firm foundation for my marriage" she wrote, "and hence submitted myself to his desires and views at every cost". They had just achieved equilibrium in their marriage,

despite the strains, when her husband was transferred to a distant place. The wife decided not to resign her job and go with him but, six months later, plagued by loneliness, decided to pay him a surprise visit. To her dismay, she found him with another woman, and in a rage returned to her parents. Two years later she got a divorce. But she now regrets the decision:

"Of course, I am economically well off; still I need security. I need, above all, a man. A lonely life is a curse and horrible to live..."

"I think I was too hasty in my decision in seeking a divorce. I could have brought my husband to the right track, if I tried.

"I should have given him a warning, or at least, a chance to improve... My daughter Asha... is the major sufferer through no fault of hers... I should have recognised the fact that his loneliness might have mingled with a chance happening to ultimately result in sex.

"Why had I forgotten that I too had committed the same crime before marriage, but had only told him about an affair..."

"Patience, maturity and more understanding might have saved our marriage, but my friends misguided me. I blame myself for listening to them..."

In this true life story, as against the fictional tales with happy endings, the mother-in-law is shown to be an unpleasant, greedy and unaccommodating person, and her son a mother's boy. Nonetheless, the wife feels that it was her own stubbornness that was to blame: she should have made more efforts to "adjust"

The next true life story makes clear to us what is implicit in the earlier case, namely, that the wife's failure to "adjust" is in direct proportion to the moral and material support she receives from her parents. "It's over spilt milk that I cry" again features a mother's boy and a domineering mother-in-law

who made every effort to restrict the couple's opportunities for intimacy. The wife felt constricted in the hostile atmosphere of her husband's home, and resentful that her mother-in-law had taken away all her jewellery and commanded her salary also. She returned to her parents' house for her delivery and was deeply dismayed when no one came to visit her. "My in-laws liked neither the fact that I had gone home for the delivery, nor the birth of a female baby." Ultimately, to her joy, the husband came to see her, but they were scarcely reconciled before she found herself pregnant again. Against her husband's and mother-in-law's wishes, she had an abortion, and returned to her parents' place to recoup. But her husband never came to see her "I had committed the ultimate offence in getting the foetus aborted against their wishes. It's not legal sanction alone but also social sanction that matter(s) in affairs such as these, and I learnt this the hard way that day!" In due course, her father encouraged her to go ahead with divorce. However, with her father now dead (of a broken heart) and her brothers' wives hostile, she regrets the decision and wonders whether her father was friend or foe: "If he had not spoiled or pampered me, I'd have a different story to tell. If only he had not encouraged and abetted me in my lack of adjustment—if he had given me sound advice and taught me to win over my in-laws with love—my life would have been different.

"Why, there was a friend of mine who had had to part not only with her jewellery but her entire dowry, which was utilised for her sister-in-law's marriage. She gave her consent graciously and won the love and respect of her in-laws almost simultaneously. To this date they worship the very ground she walks on.

"What a fuss we had made over a few items of jewellery. What's a neck devoid of a gold chain, as compared to

an existence devoid of the zest of life?...

“A few years of patience and endurance and everything would have worked out.”

The third case is of rather a different kind. “A modern liberated woman”, mother of two children, had been unhappily married for 11 years to a drunkard who, in her own words, “could not even begin to realise (her) worth, nor meet (her) on any plane, be it mental, physical or emotional.” In this vulnerable condition, she fell in love with a wealthy exporter and, abandoning her husband and son, went to live with him. Immediately, he became domineering and possessive. To make matters worse, the man’s unsophisticated village wife and sons turned up. Realising her mistake, she left the exporter, and now lives independently with her daughter. But she misses her son, worries for the future of her daughter, and regrets her mistake: “If my husband was a drunkard, perhaps I drove him to drink. It was when my job began to interfere with my housekeeping and his irritability at my habitual absence took its toll on his work, that his promotions had ceased while mine had increased. Ego problems cropped up and he hit the bottle.

“I was equally to blame for living as a stranger with my husband under the same roof. If only I had traded my pride for understanding, our lives would have been so different”

Once again, the divorcee fears for her child, longs for the social security of the title “Mrs”, and blames herself for the divorce. The theme of “adjustment”, that is, the asymmetrical adjustment by the wife with the husband, is thus projected as looming as large in “life” as in fiction.

Recipe for Happy Marriage

Quite coincidentally, a recent article in *Women’s Era*, entitled “What makes a happy marriage?” corroborates some of the points that emerge from our analysis.

The author discounts the usual criteria that feature in matrimonial advertisements in India: caste, beauty, colour of skin, age, height, weight, convent education, language and nationality. These should be merely secondary considerations. The really important considerations are that the girl should be of the same social status as the boy, or of a slightly lower status, but not the reverse; that the woman should preferably be less educated than the man: “If the man is less educated than the woman, they will be sitting on the top of a volcano”; and that the husband should earn more and also have better career prospects: “The groom is the provider and bread-winner.” Moreover, significantly: “If both are earning members before marriage, the groom’s income should be greater than the bride’s. If the earnings are more or less equal and if the woman holds a position with rapid promotion prospects, an alliance between the two persons had better be avoided.” Additionally, the couple should share the same food preferences; they should have the same religion or one of them should be “neutral” in respect to religion; and they should feel attraction for each other. If all these criteria are met, one has a round peg and a round hole, but a further process of grooving is required before the husband and wife become “one body.” This is what the author calls “mutual adjustment”, a process of “give and take” or, more accurately, “giving in”: “Keep on giving in, giving in and giving in until there is nothing left for the other to ask for any more give-ins.” What the article does not explain in so many words - in fact, the term “mutual adjustment” disguises the true situation - is the social expectation, so blatantly revealed in the fictional accounts of marital crises, that it is the wife who will most often be required to give in, for she has, after all, a great deal more at stake in the marriage.

Tentative Conclusions

Our conclusions can at best be tentative, for our sample was rather a small one, and we are not in a position to compare this archive of largely women authored texts aimed at a female, English educated, middle class audience with, for instance, stories by male authors, stories in male oriented and gender neutral publications, in vernacular languages or in reading material directed at a different class of readership: the study of popular culture is still very much in its infancy. We have also not been in a position to compare this representation of conjugal relations in any disciplined way with that found in more “literary” texts. Though the wife’s longing for intimacy with the husband is apparently a common preoccupation of both popular and literary works it would seem that the latter may be more explicit in recognising female sexuality on the one hand, and, being richer in texture and characterisation, may give more play to women’s subversive voices through different female characters and dramatic situations. But, unless preoccupation with romance is itself recognised as a subversive position, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the stories we have analysed do reinforce a woman’s position of dependence and vulnerability within the conjugal relation.

“Compromise” or “adjustment”, the stories tell us, is the key to marital happiness. It may be a mutual process. But typically, though not invariably, it is the wife who is advised to “adjust”: compromise is for the most part asymmetrical, an affirmation of male dominance in the family as in society.

If mediation fails, the marriage will end in divorce, but this is not seen as a proper solution to a state of marital discord. On the contrary, it is seen as signifying a woman’s personal failure and worthlessness since the marital state is seen as a woman’s primary source of self validation, and also as the precondition for blissful motherhood. □