



Readers' Forum



And then Came the Tears

I am a thirty-two year old, single woman working in the United States. When I left India to seek my fortune, I was confident that I could stand up in the world alone. Marriage was very far from my mind. My aim was to earn a doctoral degree and have a wonderful professional career. In some misty future I was going to have a family, but it was not a top priority. But loneliness erodes self-confidence. So my profession slowly got relegated to a second position while marriage assumed paramount importance.

We met in downtown Boulder. This was our second meeting in two days. Yesterday we had met over lunch and taken stock of each other. Today, we were to decide whether to go ahead with the alliance or not. We had talked over the phone these past two months, exchanged e-mails, and seen each other's photographs. I liked him; he was well educated, well read, well travelled. What really impressed me was that he was the first man I had met who appeared to have no hassles, if he had to move to a place where I could get a better job. Not many men of my acquaintance were so accommodating.

Downtown was teeming with people: this was the first day in two weeks that we were seeing the sun. The snow was still piled on the roads and the fields. But under the glare of

the sun it was slowly melting. The downtown was decked up, for it would be Christmas in a couple of weeks. We sat down on the bench: the sun hit our eyes so I looked down at the pavement and he half-turned away from me, watching the children play in the park.

"Do you have any questions that you want to ask me?" I asked.

"Yes. When I asked you yesterday whether you can take time off you said that you can't."

"That is right. I can't take off for a year or two from my work, because if I do I will fall behind, and that would be the end of my career. It is one of the drawbacks of being a scientist."

"What if you have children?" I did not reply immediately. I had not expected this question from him. I looked at my shoes trying to formulate an answer. You should make compromises instead of being rigid, my mother had often advised. But I never saw myself as rigid. I was brought up to follow the principle of equality. If I got married I expected my partner and myself to share all our duties.

"I will try to make adjustments. I am not saying at any point that I will neglect my family for my career or vice-versa."

He made no comment, though I could feel his eyes on me. I looked up and said, "I do expect my husband to help with the household work and

looking after the children." He turned away to look at the children again.

"You also said that you don't have any job opportunities where I live," he said after a few moments.

"That is right."

"Well, moving is not a problem for me, only I cannot do it now. I am due for tenure, and if I get the tenure then in a few months I can go on a sabbatical. I want to write a book and I need this break from teaching. I have been teaching for these past five years. Also, I have been thinking. You say that you have job possibilities in Boston and California. Both the places are expensive, you know. I got job offers in both places, but I turned them down because of the cost of living. My friends tell me that one cannot buy a house even for a million dollars," he laughed. "Can you imagine that?"

I kept quiet. If he didn't want to move then why did he say that he could move? He suddenly stood up before me. I looked up at him wonderingly.

"I love children. I want to have them. I love my friend's children but there is only so much one can do with them. That is why I have decided to get married. Look, I am thirty-six but age for men doesn't matter. You are thirty-two and your biological clock is ticking away. If we wait until you are secure in your career, it will be too

late. We have to have children soon, very soon."

I stopped listening after the biological clock stuff. I had heard my unmarried friends talk about how they had been told they would not be able to bear children if they left it too late. I had sat with them sharing their sorrows and tears at being told this by men, but I had never myself experienced it. Until now. Why? Was this what marriage was all about? About procreation? Is that how men saw me now? As a woman whose biological clock was ticking away? I said softly, "I too love children. But it doesn't matter to me whether I have children of my own or not. I would love to adopt a child."

He turned away, his attention once more claimed by the children in the park. Carollers, dressed in the nineteenth century costumes, came by singing carols.

"What is this?"

"Carollers," I replied succinctly.

"How does their dress stay up like that?"

I shrugged and said, "I don't know. Hoop of some kind?"

"Bicycle hoops," he said decisively. "Let's go and have coffee."

I waited at the table as he ordered coffee for himself. The carollers too came in. "Have you seen the movie, 'The Magnificent Ambersons'?"

"No, but I have read the book."

"Oh. The movie chronicles the evolution of dress. Do you think it is a bicycle hoop?"

"I will look for a job where you live," I suddenly acquiesced. "Do that," he said in a complacent voice. "When do you want to get married?"

"Some time next year. July? December?"

"What about this December?"

"Next month?" I couldn't help the amazement in my voice. Didn't he want us to get to know each other?

"Why not? Think about it. I think it will all work out perfectly," he added smugly.

That was when something snapped. What was this marriage supposed to be all about? "Let me get this straight," I said. "You want me to move where you are, get married to you next month, have a baby, and put my career on hold."

"I am not asking you to put your career on hold. I just want you to take it easy for the next couple of years."

I took a deep breath, my legs were trembling for I hated confrontations, and continued, "And when I said that I would expect my husband to help me, you just kept quiet."

He laughed, "I am not a traditional husband and I am not looking for a traditional wife. Of course it goes without saying that I will give a hand around the house."

"Then why did you question me? Just because I am a woman? Don't you think that if it goes without saying for you, it goes without saying for me?" He watched me silently. "And what hurt me most was when you made that statement about my age and my biological clock ticking."

"Look," he was exasperated, "I was just trying to make things clear here. I want to start a family. Children are important to me. Your career time frame just doesn't make sense. That is why I brought up the point about your age."

I snapped, "My age is something that even my parents don't dare point out to me. They understand why I have postponed marriage. Marriage is not only about procreation. It is about companionship, about living together for the rest of your life. Children might happen, and might not happen."

"Children are the centre point of any marriage," he countered.

"And what happens after the children? After they grow up and leave? What happens to us? And you knew about my age," I veered back towards that point, "you knew it right at the beginning. So why didn't you

raise the issue then? Why didn't you tell me about it then? Why now? It is so hurtful."

"Look," he repeated, "I want a child. I feel biologically incomplete. I cannot have the child by myself. I am willing to go to any length, make any sacrifice, which is why I want to get married. That is why I am concerned about your age and your body. I am not anti-women. I have attended feminist workshops since the nineties, and two of my students have done a paper on this topic."

"You don't understand, do you? I am angry that you could utter such a hurtful thing. I am angry that the only reason you want to get married is that you want to have a child. I am angry..."

"We have differing points of view about marriage," he said stiffly. "I don't think this will work out."

I got up, "No. I don't think this will work out."

The sun blinded me for a moment as I stepped out of the café. I was seething with anger. I wanted to yell at him that I was not a bloody breeding machine, that I was a human being too, that I was as proud of my scholastic achievements as he was, that I too wanted a career. This anger remained with me for more than a month while I explained to my parents, my friends, to anyone who cared to listen, why I had refused to marry him.

Underneath that anger I wondered whether I would ever get married. Was I justified in saying no to a man who wanted a family? Didn't I want that ultimately? Wasn't I causing undue stress to my parents by saying no to every alliance? Was it wrong of me to put so much emphasis on my career? Weren't so many women happy looking after their children?

Finally my anger simmered down, leaving behind the doubts, and then came the tears.

Rohini Muthuswami, via e-mail

The Perils of Choice

The issue of sex-selective abortions in India is disturbing to me in many ways as I find myself caught in a “philosophical bind”. I consider myself to be a feminist, not a staunch feminist, but one in my own right. I am pro-choice. I always have been since high school; I believe in a woman’s “right to choose”. But the thought of a family justifying the death of their baby girl because she is “socially invaluable”, saddens me. As a South Asian woman born and raised in Canada, what races through my mind is, “What if I was one of those little girls who never got a chance at life because I was seen as a burden?” So how can I justify my stance on “choice”, when I oppose gender-biased abortions?

The rhetoric of “choice” is not as easy as I thought it would be in matters of reproduction for many women of colour and women of the Third World. It is their material and social environment which determine what choices become available to them. “Choice” is not just a simple decision made by a woman in India whether she is a high-caste “Delhite” or a rural peasant girl. The lack of social facilities for child care, economic constraints, low status of women, and male privilege, all influence a woman’s choice, a choice that is not truly independent. Women are trapped in a patriarchal and sexist society, and I think this perspective does not apply only in India, but to many women all over the world. “Choice”, promoted by a Western feminist concern for individual ownership of the female body, does not increase the control women have over their reproduction, and the so-called liberating facets of new reproductive technologies do not offer a bona fide choice for women in India. The fact that abortion in India was legalized independently

of the women’s movement reflects this.

The focus on choice, to me, seems irrelevant in India because population control is aggressively promoted by the government and international agencies, and abortions are available on demand for family planning purposes. The women of India face the realities of state concern with the “ideal family” size, strong male preference, repeated pregnancies and continuous abortions to produce male heirs to meet the demands of patriarchal families, all of which expose women to physical and mental abuse. I believe that the issue of sex-selection in India is centered around “rights”. Although there is some discussion on the “choice” to abort a female foetus, this choice is usually not authentic due to the existing social conditions in India. Most of the discussion, therefore, does not revolve around choice per se. Rather, it revolves around the long-term consequences of sex-selective abortions, such as the demographic impact, the significance of the practice for the further devaluation of women, and the physical health of women and female children. The patriarchal practice of female infanticide has “reincarnated” itself through the practice of sex determination tests followed by sex-selective abortions, reinforcing the notion of a culture that devalues women. The use of this technology is, therefore, recreating new forms of patriarchy in contemporary India.

Furthermore, it is important to understand the issue of reproductive rights as a human rights issue where women should be free to decide on the number and spacing of their children. To pressurize and coerce women into killing their “little girls” is a form of violence against these women and the girl child. Patriarchal structures and ideologies are detrimental to understanding a woman’s reproductive self-

determination. I think the power imbalance between men and women within the family system must change to ensure that reproductive choice becomes a reality for all women.

A culture that worships sons and considers the birth of a daughter to be a “burden”, dehumanizes the girl child. Today the rejection of the unwanted girl begins before her birth with the use of sex-determination tests. Those girls who do manage to survive until birth and beyond find that the dice is heavily loaded against them. The neglected girl child is denied basic human dignity, and has to face the realities of female foeticide, female malnutrition, female prostitution, dowry, and the constant devaluation of women. She is glorified as the self-sacrificing daughter and wife. Her labour is the backbone of her family but robs her of her childhood and future livelihood. The most important problem women face today is the issue of violence against them - rape, kidnapping, murder, physical and verbal abuse, and sexual assault. Similarly, the use of sex-determination tests is far from being an issue of freedom of “choice.” Rather, it is a threat against women’s basic human rights and is yet another form of violence committed against them and the female foetus. We can see that choice in the Indian context, as with many women of colour in the West, diminishes, when placed along with the realities of eugenics, discrimination, and poverty.

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