

Marriage, Wellbeing, and Contingent Narratives about the 'Self'



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Introduction



Talking about marriage is a way of talking about the 'self' and reflecting on the meaning of being a social person

Marriage and Wellbeing in Sri Lanka



- Marriage, family and kinship fundamental to a person's social identity.
- Formation of close and inter-dependent relationships and experiences of relatedness.
- Belonging and security
- Transition to adulthood
- Personal fulfilment for women
- Good marriage = successful and fulfilled life

Marriage and 'Modernity'



- Household – site of production to site of consumption
- Family structure – extended to nuclear forms
- Companionate marriage - dominant form of conjugal relations with emphasis on the couple
- Changes in several domains
 - **Symbolic** – changes in marriage customs and rituals
 - **Relational** – more egalitarian gender relations
 - **Personal** – thinking actors not followers of convention

(Abu-Lughod 1991; Collier 1987; Donner 2008; Kendall 2004; Moore 1998; Osella and Osella 2000)

Contingent Narratives



- Construction of a 'choosing person'
- But agency as a responsibility – making the 'right' choice and contracting a 'good' marriage
- Outside of the framework of a 'good' marriage, narratives of choice and self assertion are culturally censured
- 'Fate' and 'circumstance' – alternate narratives allow women to be accepted by families
- Tension between 'choosing person' and 'relational self'

Namali – Making the ‘Right’ Choice



I know my mother no [...] she thinks in a totally different way. My thinking pattern and her thinking pattern are totally different [...] My mother is well, not modern at all, not modern thinking. She didn't like me going out with a boy alone.

My mother asked me, ‘what do you have with Sampath?’ So I asked her, ‘why, is Sampath not good enough?’

Most of the women we visit are shy. They are not sociable at all [...] Obviously if they were sociable they would not have waited for 32 years to get married—they would have found a boyfriend by now!

Namali



*I got bloody pissed off. I told her: 'Ācci (Grandma), I will give you one year to find me someone better than Sampath in every way and I will marry him. When I say 'in every way', I mean not only should he be from a better caste; he should love me more than Sampath does; he should be **more educated**; he should have **more money** than Sampath, he should be **better than Sampath** in every way!' After that no one talked about caste*

Secret Courtship , Background Checks, and Horoscopes

We were very secretive [...] we did things without anyone knowing [...] I only told my mother after I finished my degree

Roshanthi

Making 'right' choices at the 'wrong' time



This whole thing started with [my parents] lecturing me about not having a boyfriend. So I told them that I had one [...] They warned me that that my horoscope says that if I get married before my twenty-second birthday that it will end up in a divorce; that I would have two marriages if I married before I was twenty-two.

I had never been a person who extremely believed in horoscopes [...] Getting married before my twenty-second birthday seemed like it would ever happen. I talked to [my boyfriend] and he said that if it does happen we could always get divorced and remarry. We did have options—so what!?

Roshanthi



But when my parents started forcing me to finish a PhD before I got married, I couldn't think of straying in school any longer [...] So he and I eloped pretty much. My parents had no say in it, so we eloped about a month before my 22nd birthday. And at that time it didn't occur to me if I had stayed another month it would I would be going over that.

If we had kids would we have separated and gotten divorced? Probably not. It was not as if we were fighting, and it wasn't like we were sick of each other. It was just not working out [...] I think it would have been different under different circumstances, but in our horoscopes . . . (she does not complete the sentence).

Roshanthi



My mother had checked the horoscope again and she said that it says that you are going to have another marriage-a good one. I was like 'whatever' [...] Because I was so confused, I went to the astrologer on my own and he said 'a marriage is imminent [...] by January 16th (this was on December 23rd) by January 16th you will know'

Neomal and I had been in touch [...] and we met up when I was in Sri Lanka. So that was on the 26th, we went out together on the 27th and 28th. He asked for my number saying he will call me. By the time I had landed in the UK he had already called me, e-mailed me, sms-ed me, messaged me on FB [...] And it sort of happened that on the January 11th he said "how about you and me?" This guy had said January 16th [...] I was like really amazed [...]

Roshanthi



I always knew I wanted to get married again, I don't mind living on my own. I am very independent. I can take care of myself but I need that emotional aspect [...] So when I met Neomal, I told him 'I'm not a stay at home type. I need to make my own money. I need to keep myself occupied whether I have money or not. I need to find my own money. I like to do my own things like drive, meet up with friends', and he was OK with it.

Conclusion



- Multiple narratives about the 'self' - contingent on cultural context and circumstances of people's life
- Agency as responsibility
 - Choices made within a relational context
 - Accountability to families
 - Anxiety around making 'wise' choices. Freedom to choose does not mean license to make mistakes
- Collectivity of Narratives - Families colluding with narratives for family cohesion and integrity of the family