SOCIAL TRENDS
Journal of the Department of Sociology of North Bengal University
Vol. 6, 31 March 2019; ISSN: 2348-6538
Peer-reviewed National Journal
UGC approved (Sl. No. 42176)

3

Symbols of Heterosexual Marriage and Negotiations of Heteronormativity: Narratives of Three Generations of Urban Middle-Class Bengali Women Living in Kolkata

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Abstract: *Through interview-generated narratives of women of three generations of urban middle-class Bengalis living in Kolkata and other auto-ethnographic narrative texts; this paper seeks to examine gender, generation and class specific meanings of intimate heterosexual identities and relations. It focuses on the ways in which subjects negotiate, that is, confirm and interrogate, uphold and challenge, submit and rebel institutionalized heterosexuality or hetero-normativity through the practice of bearing, not bearing and negotiating with symbols of marriage. Subjects' ongoing negotiations that tell stories of multiple and contradictory subjectivities, are analyzed to show how personal narratives of intimacy vary across a range of conflicting and competing colonialist, nationalist and trans-nationalist discourses of heterosexuality and cultural mandates of femininity. The paper:*

- *demonstrates that expressions of heterosexual love are socially ordered, culturally learnt and linguistically mediated*
- *examines the power and vulnerability of doing gender and doing class through doing intimacy*
- *brings out the cultural politics of gendering that mediated the colonial history of Bengal*
- *shows how this politics of gendering still reigns strong within a contemporary, urban middleclass Bengali society. This is particularly evident in its women's narratives of respectable middle-class femininity, who have now come to embody a "modern" Bengal, without, however, failing to bear the cultural "authenticity" of her nation, community, and family*
- *critiques the "individualization thesis" of reflexive modernization by demonstrating that practices of heterosexual love overlap with gender and class-cultural practices and are strongly embedded within family relations, both real and imagined, and*

- *interrogates a colonial-modernist concept of unilinear progress by illustrating, through generational narratives of heterosexual intimacy, the shifting meanings and mutual co-constitution of the putative dichotomous categories of "tradition" and "modern", "East" and "West".*

***Key Words*:** Gender, love, heterosexuality, intimacy, family, class-culture, generation, postcolonial, reflexive modernization, narrative.

Introduction

Through ethnographic participation-observation and interview-generated narratives of three generations of urban middle-class women living in Kolkata; this paper demonstrates that personal expressions of heterosexuality, are, in fact, socially ordered, culturally learnt and linguistically mediated. The paper, in particular, seeks to illustrate gender, generation, and class specific meanings of intimate heterosexual identities and relations (Lawler 1999; Skeggs 1997; Jamieson 1998). It analyses the ways in which women give meaning to the institutional imperatives of Hindu, Bengali marital symbols borne only by them as mark of being married. Through this, it focuses on the ways in which these women negotiate; that is, confirm and interrogate, uphold and challenge, submit and rebel, institutionalized heterosexuality or hetero-normativity (Van Every 1996) at the inter and intra subjective levels of everyday expressions/practices of heterosexuality (Richardson 1996; Smart 1996; Jackson 1996). Subjects' ongoing negotiations at these inter-subjective levels tell stories of multiple and often contradictory subjectivities and "practices of intimacy" (Jamieson 2011) that vary across a range of discourses (Weedon 1987; Leahy 1994: 49); that are not amenable to rigid categorizations in terms of "modern" generation as opposed to the "traditional" generation, powerful and powerless, passive and active subjectivities (Mohanty 1991). Overall, the paper acknowledges heterosexual intimate practices as diverse heterosexuality rather than a monolithic, trans-historical heterosexuality (Smart 1996: 166, 170) and critically interrogates Giddens' (1991, 1992) theory of reflexive modernization that propounds universalized globalization, individualization and de-rationalization in the context of a "transformation of intimacy".

Methodology

Methodologically committed to the concept of narrative as a typical form of social life (MacIntyre 1990: 129) and life as "storied" lives (Somers

1994; Riessman 1993; Weedon 2004) that are continuously constructed through varying narrations, hearing and telling (Jackson 1998), the paper focuses on how subjects themselves give meaning to bearing marital symbols. A focus on narrative and narrativity is able to appreciate the social construction of identity that is at once "temporal, relational, and cultural, as well as institutional, material and macro-structural" (Somers 1994: 607). The analysis of this paper is based on the findings of a field-based research carried out as part of a doctoral dissertation in the year 2010-11 and continued as an auto-ethnographic exploration thereafter by virtue of the researcher's cultural participation into the field of enquiry. 26 women were interviewed across three generations. Generations were marked through age groupings and also through subjects' relationships within the family. Subjects' age ranged from 21 years to 71 years with many subjects representing the transitional age cohort between one generation and the other, allowing for continuity in cultural analysis. The generational splits through age groupings are as follows:

Third Generation	20-35 years
Second Generation	45-60 years
First Generation	70 years and above

Subjects' reported speeches have been translated, retaining their culturally contextual meanings as far as possible. Prior permissions of subjects were taken to publish their photos and an ethic of dialogical research and auto-ethnography were maintained (Reed-Danahay 1997). Subjects were based in the city of Kolkata and their class identities were discerned by subjective identifications of themselves as middle-class Bengalis. Subjects' narratives indicate middle-class location as ambiguous and fragmented. As an urban middle-class Bengali woman, I confess at the outset that my approach to this research and to the production of its sociological narrative does not assume unmediated, un-negotiated objectivity. Instead, it critically acknowledges positionalities of gender, class, generation and subjectivity of theoretical and methodological inclinations including the context of knowledge production; that variously shaped the narrative of this research (Plummer 1983; Steier 1991).

Marital Symbols: Institutional imperatives and subjective negotiations

A pair of *shakha* (white bangles of conch-shell), a pair of *pala* (red bangles made of red corals), *loha* (iron bangle) and *shindur* (vermillion applied in the parting of the hair) have traditionally been coded as symbols of a married Hindu Bengali *bhadramahila*. These symbols culturally signify good omen; a woman who bears such symbols ensures her husband's well-being and long life. Breaking of the bangles, particularly within the first year of marriage is, thus, considered inauspicious. This is strongly tied to the hetero-normative ideal of institutional marriage where unmarried women should not wear the symbols and widows are denied the "privilege" of bearing them. Widows, in addition, are also prohibited from wearing anything that is red in colour as red is codified with a meaning of sexuality that is only permitted within the licit boundaries of legal institutionalised heterosexual marriage. Myths about these symbols particularly the iron bangle, connote patriarchal territorial conquest. Such territorialisation of land can be metaphorically read in the context of marriage as men's sexual conquest and possession over women and their bodies. This paper, however, is concerned with how subjects make meaning to this ritual practice rather than trying to locate and trace the cultural history of these practices. In this, it is a study of the contemporary cultural practices and negotiations that can either take into account or can be unaware of how these practices emerged, if at all its emergence can be certainly traced. How myths take meaning in people's everyday lives is what this paper is going to be concerned with.

Popular representations of a married Hindu Bengali woman both within and across cultures, stereotype her in a "traditional" attire of a sari bearing all marital symbols. Such stereotypical representation is read from some nationalist perspectives to symbolise a *patibratanari* (husband worshipping woman) and from some radical feminist perspectives, to symbolise an oppressed victim of patriarchy. Both these perspectives read the "text" from outside, imposing their meaning rather than privileging the actor's meaning who could neither be *patibrata* nor oppressed and could possibly be re-signifying the stereotypical associations of these marital symbols by giving new meanings to bearing them. However, although meaning at one level is re-signified and creatively imbued with individual interpretation, no interpretation or re-signification is ever completely outside the broader chain of significations, or some kind of a discourse (Foucault 1990; Butler 1990).

By recognising the instability of meanings (Hall 1997), this paper appreciates from a post-colonial feminist lens, the necessity to take caution before

orientalising, exoticising and culturally homogenising "other" heterosexual expressions that are, in fact, plural, contradictory and nuanced (Spivak 1990; Mohanty 1991; Bulbeck 1998). The interactionist (Jackson and Scott 2010) and post-colonial feminist perspectives in this context offer varying and challenging modes of "reading resistance" in subjects' everyday practices of intimacy. This way of reading resistance will interrogate the cultural stereotype of the "average third world woman" as victim (Mohanty 1991: 72). The paper will bring out subjects' reflexive and creative negotiations of institutionalised heterosexuality but will also show how that such reflexivity is shaped and limited by subjects' field and habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 16-19; Lash 1994: 120), kinship and family relations, both real and imagined (Smart 2007; Morgan 1996) and a generational reproduction of gendered embodiments (Jamieson [1998] 1999).

The photo below is an instance of a Hindu Bengali ritual marriage where the man puts *shindur* on the woman's forehead.

Photo-1: Illustrates a moment of Sindoordaan (giving the Sindoor) in Bengali Hindu ritual marriage.

[Source: Tanya Roy's marriage album]

Many women, particularly within the age group of 50-70 years who regularly bear these symbols without "fail", stress on the religious significance of such symbols but often comply with such practices as non-reflexive performance of routinised habit. 55-year-old home-maker Arpita narrates how the practice of wearing *shindur* has become a part of her everyday attire. The "failure" to uphold this practice, narrativised as disturbance of her Bengali, Hindu femininity and wifehood, demonstrates the naturalisation of this heterosexual practice. Such practices that familiarise her with the everydayness of hetero-reality are imbued with hegemonic gender, religious and communal codes where, a woman's identity is equated with her identity

as someone's wife, and with the hetero-normative collective sentiment of the Hindu, Bengali community. Pushpa, 71-year-old, has lost her husband a year ago. She expresses her grief by saying that she is not as "fortunate" as her mother who passed away as "lucky" as a "rajrani" (queen) before her husband with her *shakha-sindoor* "intact". 40-year-old Dipti, a bank manager on the other hand complains how she is often pressurised to uphold these norms of marriage when she visits her husband's extended family. 51-yearDola similarly narrates how she is often talked about amongst her female colleagues for not conforming with such norms of marriage and being the "odd" one out. These hegemonic codes of heterosexual femininity are reinforced by the patriarchal institutions at large, policed within micro-interactional spaces of female homosociality and most effectively internalised as an integral part of heterosexual personhood by women themselves.

There are women who are sceptical of the religious significance of marital symbols and its regulative tradition but cannot deny completely, their semiotic value as "meaning-constitutive traditions" (Gross 2005: 288) which involve patterns of sense-making transmitted from one generation to the next. 32-year-old Suparna, an engineer says,

> I am not a "big believer or something" of wearing *shindur* but since I have always seen ma wear it and how significant it is for her; it feels a little "strange" for me not to wear it at all. Moreover, being newlywed, it is a little "odd" to immediately break familiar taken-for-granted marital traditions in-laws' presence. So, I just wear it like a very small "dot" so that it cannot be easily visible. That way you take care of all sentiments! (Expresses contentment on her face).

Suparna's narrative brings out the concept of self as embedded within one's family relations and traditions (Smart 2007: 188) and as constituted by shared generational meanings that enable and pose limits to the self's unbounded creativity and agency which the individualisation thesis seems to unproblematically champion (Jamieson 1999; Gross 2005; Smart 2007). Suparna and many other women of her generation do not necessarily equate their femininity with such symbols. However, they cannot completely deny the semiotic value of marital symbols and hence bear them in a way that is inconspicuous. They often avoid the *shakha* and *pala* but rarely the gold made ornamental *loha* and bear the *shindur* by paradoxically concealing it. Women's modern professional identities and trans-national representation of self through "smart western wear", in 30-year-old Dia's words

sometimes seem to be at odds with the supposed traditional conformity with bearing marital symbols. Therefore, they negotiate this "traditional" practice that is also a part of their "modern" identity at the inter-subjective and the intra-subjective level, in a strategic way if not by its outright rejection.

Such negotiations appreciate the co-existence of otherwise dichotomous categories of "tradition" and "modernity" within an ambivalent third space of hybridity and manifest "interstitial agency" of "cultures in-between" (Bhabha 1996: 58). The next narrative will go further than the concept of hybridity to problematise the very category of "tradition" and "modern". 30-year-old Anandita, a journalist narrates disdainfully,

> I find wearing *shakha* and *pala*, but not so much *loha* as quite *gaiya* (of the rural) and "backward" *shekelepratha* (past traditions)! Although she claims, "love and marriage do not need symbols of proof", she contradictorily wears her diamond wedding ring which she narratives as very "special" to me as it symbolises our "togetherness" and lifelong coupling.

It is interesting to appreciate Anandita's subjectivity as fragmented and contradictory where she, at once confirms and rejects the semiotic registers of heterosexual love, romance and conjugality. What is more sociologically significant in this contradictory narrative is the influence of a broader orientalist politics of time and progress. It is interesting to note her chain of significations of *shakha* and *pala* as "rural" and rural as backward and backward as traditional, whereas it's relational binary, the Eurocentric wedding ring, now cross-culturally widely accepted as part of a wedding vow, comes to be relationally signified as part of an urban, progressive and modern heterosexual identity. This association of an almost naturalised Western signifier of coupling with modernity and modernity with urbanity and urbanity with progress and progress with romantic monogamous marriage, narrativised as "lifelong coupling", trans-nationally reproduces the hegemonic codes of heterosexual intimacy. This orientalist politics of a progressive Western form of coupling, is set against its "other", the traditional, backward, rural significations of coupling that may often tell the same story.

It is also interesting to see how many women "modernize" these "traditional" marital symbols by wearing more decorative *shakha* and *pala* to exhibit it as an accessory or read in another way, as a spectacle of consumption. 53-year-old home-maker Gayatri narrates,

> I have decorated my *shnakha* with gold patterns to make it appear as a "modern" accessory. I've also made it sleak. The clumsy ugly thick traditional ones look really *gaiya*. This way you don't avoid wearing the *shakha* which may bring bad omen.

Gayatri simultaneously narrativises traditional symbols of marriage as an unavoidable part of self yet constraining; metaphorically represented through adjectives like "clumsy", "thick" and "ugly". To keep alive these traditional symbols, they need to be "decorated" and made "sleak". Gayatri's narrative makes a local tradition of heterosexuality viable within and through the globalised, capitalistic model of intimacy (Lasch 1977).

The traditional significance of marital symbols is also often secularised by re-defining and re-interpreting its religious value. This is evident in the narratives of women who do not regularly bear marital symbols but wear them as accessories to enhance a 'traditional' Bengali look' represented by a white sari with a red border worn particularly although not exclusively during Bengali cultural festivities and religious ceremonies. A non-conformity with these Hindu ritualistic notions of marriage interrogates patriarchal gendered codes but cannot be seen as radical enough to lie outside of the codes of institutional marriage. No subjects narrated wearing them as accessories before they were married. This secular use of symbols as accessories also affirms hegemonic codes of middle-class Hindu Bengaliness that marks off through the Bengali bhadramahila's body, the non-Bengali, the non-Hindu "others". Women come to represent the cultural "authenticity" of a particular nation/community and bodily bear its claimed cultural superiority over "others" (Sarkar 2001, Chatterjee 1989).

Photo-2 The second woman from the right is married, wearing a sari with all the symbols of marriage on the occasion of Durga Puja, the most widely celebrated religious festival of the Bengalis.

Shindur Khela, literally translated as vermillion play is a Hindu Bengali cultural ritual performed during the fourth and final day of the most important Bengali religious-cultural festival of the worship of goddess Durga, the symbol of good over evil and the epitome of feminine strength. Shindur Khela is performed by married women although unmarried women also often take part in the "play". Sindoor is rubbed onto each other's faces and particularly onto the forehead of those married. Played within an intra-gender intimate space, this ritual symbolises marital happiness within and through female homosociality. 22-year-old student Chandrika and her cousin sisters, of whom one is married, get together for their family Durga Puja. She says,

> We have a lot of fun putting *shindur* on each other's' cheeks. Sometimes, playfully in "fun", we put it on each other's' forehead just to feel like we are married and imagine how we might look after we get married (shyly smiles). Boys also play along in this fun and act as if they were husband to their "girlfriend" and "would-be-wife".

Photo-3 Illustrates the ritual of shindurkhela during the Bengal festival of Durga Puja.

[Photo 2&3, Source: Chandrika Podder's personal album]

The communal and gendered connotation underpinning Shindur Khela, thus reproduces the "heterosexual imaginary" (Ingraham 1996) through the most effective means of "playful fun".

31-year-old Sunanda is a teacher of the social sciences in a college. She claims,

> As modern, progressive and educated women of today, we should not unreflectively and passively remain oppressed victims of male domination and it's taken-for-granted rituals. Else, how would it differentiate us from the *shadharon modhhyo bittyo* (ordinary middle-class). I told my partner that forget about my wearing *shakha sindoor*, I will only get married if we just have a "court marriage" and a simple "engagement ring exchange ceremony" rather than go through all that "meaningless high caste Brahmanical Hindu ritual marriage". Although my in-laws are pretty traditional and conservative and I knew they would not easily accept just a legal marriage, I told my partner that if he "cared" for me then he will have to "convince" his parents.

Sunanda's resistance to "meaningless" rituals makes a "reflexive" political language of resistance to hegemonic codes of gender and casteism. In resisting a patriarchal religious discourse, however, she complies with a patriarchal legal discourse of legitimate institutionalised marriage. The Westernised ritual of ring ceremony adapted within the Bengali *bhadrasamaj* illustrates again local adaptations of hegemonic codes of trans-national intimacy (Puri 1999).

Sunanda's "modern", "educated" "progressive" middle-class self is contrasted with the "shadharon" and 'oppressed' other. These invocations of self-identity in relation to her intimate space politicise certain hierarchical value judgment that distinguishes the self from the other. Sunanda's directly narrativised and implied binary can be seen to be an influence of hegemonic Western modernity and feminism (Mohanty 1991). What Sunanda's educated, modern, progressive, self-reflexivity fails to critically interrogate is her conformity to a trans-national discourse of hetero-normative intimacy and a monolithic feminism that stereotypes and homogenises identity, experience and practices.

Conclusion

Subjects' narratives empirically illustrate Foucault's claim (1990: 95) that 'where there is power there is resistance'. However, these empirical cases also illustrate the relatively less quoted second part of Foucault's claim – 'and yet or rather consequently this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (95). Claims to different forms and practices

of intimacies such as "modern", "progressive" or "traditional" may be 'personal' narratives of the self but nevertheless highly mediated by power relations and broader discourses of subject formation. Empirical instances of intimacy within contemporary post-colonial Bengal show that the theories of reflexive moderisation over exaggerate unbounded agency of unbridled individuals, fail to appreciate specific socio-cultural connectedness of personal lives (Smart 2007) that are, in fact, embedded within "meaning-constitutive traditions" (Gross 2005), structural and cultural relations of family, kinship, gender, generation (Jamieson 1998, 1999, 2011), and embodied class-culture through "habitus" (Bourdieu 1984).

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