
Article

**Subjectivity and the “Native” Ethnographer:
Researcher Eligibility in an Ethnographic Study of Urban Indian Women in Hindu
Arranged Marriages**

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Abstract

In this conversation, the author’s goal is to discuss subjectivity/s as evolving and temporal representational emergences in ethnographic fieldwork. She uses her participation in a narrative ethnographic study of women’s experiences in Hindu arranged marriages to show how her positions traveled and constantly shifted in the years of fieldwork. Ultimately, she shifts focus to her fieldwork and explores the ways in which her co-participants shifted her selves and, in so doing, “represented” their own marital stories. As she does so, she shows herself caught between eligibilities granted to her by her participants and how these shaped what she discerned in the narratives. Her broader goal in enacting these tough yet healthy tensions is to facilitate a dialogue on how the resculpting of the ethnographer shows us the recursive relationship among subjectivity/s, representation, and interpretation.

Keywords: subjectivities, Hindu women, arranged marriages, representation, reflexivity

At an in-house faculty colloquium at my university in fall 2003, a scholar asked me to reflect on how Indian readers might respond to my ethnographic study of urban Indian women’s experiences in Hindu arranged marriages. He observed that I had told some “pretty intimate stories” about these women from a South Delhi Punjabi community. I was unsurprised by his question. In fact, I had fussed over such questions myself. I responded by saying that I was unsure of the response but hoped that readers would appreciate the descriptive nature of the study and my subjective interpretations. This person, an outsider to the context of my study, used the example of Black intellectual Cornel West to assert that West’s “insider” work is often criticized as a washing of the Black community’s dirty laundry in public. He suggested that an insider’s stories were more vulnerable to criticism and told me to think of how I might respond to such charges.

I remember asserting that in revealing insider secrets without regard for the community, I would be inadvertently insulting myself, because, after all, it was also my community. Moreover, I continued, I was a “persisting” presence in the study as an ethnographic “I” who was self-conscious about showing the reader how she arrived at her analyses by being as transparent as possible. I, too, was vulnerable to being

represented by the women with whom I was studying. My interpretations and representations could never be “clean” of their and my emergent identities in the field.

At another research colloquium in a different university, I encountered an entirely disparate scenario. After my talk, I was told that I was a “breach” in the ethnographic study, and then was asked to comment on this observation. The scholars in this particular audience were more sympathetic to ethnographic life history work. My first instinct was denial. I told them that I had never thought of myself as a breach, perhaps a partial insider, but never a breach. I have always considered my positions liminal, but I have never entertained the idea that I am a breach.

In these two exchanges, just a few months apart, two layers of my ethnographer identity were dealt me. I was charged with both overt insiderness and overt outsidership. I took both charges seriously because I had begun fieldwork with intense periods of introspection about my role(s) in the study and the tenuous nature of my field identity(s). I had already spent many seasons interrogating my legitimacy to conduct research among those I consider my own in a place that I consider my own. The above exchanges provided me with an impetus to begin further reflections on my ethnographic statures in the field and their relevance to my fieldwork and interpretations.

Native/other/another

I am a relative newcomer to anthropological work and have been involved in “native” ethnographic studies for less than a decade. I have become most comfortable with the idea that any ethnographer, whether native or other, (re)enters her field ensconced in degrees of outsidership created by temporal, geographic, demographic, intellectual, or emotional distance from the field, or it might be a deliberate stance taken by the anthropologist. Whatever the type, these distances occasion identity transformations, thereby making ethnographic sites fecund for the mingling, multiplying, and disappearance of various self-identities: those of the ethnographer as well as her participants. Thus, ethnographic locales are necessarily liminal, becoming spaces where others, natives, and another’s intersect. As a result, our ethnographic encounters and our writing of them become experiences of shared subjectivity and multiplex subjectivity (Angrosino, 1998; Rosaldo, 1989).

Yet, who is native, and who is other? In traditional anthropology, these questions remained uncontested, because the other in question was always the colonized. Of course, those days of colonial certainty have long gone, and I am thankful that this is so. For many decades now, anthropologists have contended that the extent to which anyone (native or other) is an “authentic” insider is contestable, because we are in a time when anthropologists can be viewed only in terms of “shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations” (K. Narayan, 1993, p. 671; see also Kondo, 1990). As Rosaldo (1989) has pointed out, “The Lone Ethnographer’s guiding fiction of cultural compartments has crumbled. So-called natives do not ‘inhabit’ a world fully separate from the one ethnographers ‘live in’ ” (p. 45; see Rosaldo, 1989). K. Narayan (1993), a “native” anthropologist, argued against a native versus non-native dichotomy, suggesting that for her as a native anthropologist, fieldwork might be considered a deepening of the familiar rather than a discovery of the other. Furthermore, she urged all anthropologists to aim for an “enactment of hybridity in our texts; that is, writing that depicts authors as minimally bicultural in terms of belonging simultaneously to the world of engaged scholarship and the world of everyday life” (1993, p. 672, emphasis in original). In other words, whether native or other, we are all “another’s” in the field, because there will always be facets of our selves that connect us with the people we study and other facets that emphasize our difference (K. Narayan, 1993; see also Bruner, 1993; Jackson, 1989).

I invoke these scholars, because I hope to partake in their conversations about native/other by exploring the “shifting selves,” the hybridity(ies) that I experienced as a partial insider/native anthropologist in my

field. Although there is no doubt that native ethnographic sojourners have the privilege of an intimate affinity with the lifeworlds of those they seek to understand, they are merely lucky if they are romantically and unquestionably welcomed back into their fields (see Sherif, 2001). Those of us natives who remain intimate and “professional strangers” (Agar, 1996) but for a brief period are fortunate. For most of us, the semblance of a “complete” insider status can be achieved after extended periods of immersion, and realistically, a complete insider we might never become, as other distances persist and are often necessary to facilitate observation. Even as natives, we might find ourselves in fields of ambiguity—being and becoming insiders, outsiders, or partial insiders—positions invoked and orchestrated by our participants. When I use the word orchestrate, I am suggesting not manipulation but a rhythmic dance and a merry medley created when lifeworlds mingle. In evoking these rhythms, I am acknowledging the power inherent in the locales we make our own.

This power claimed parts of my ethnographic selves in my recent ethnographic travels. Embarking on an ethnographic life history study of contemporary Indian women in Hindu arranged marriages in Delhi, India, I reentered the field (my erstwhile home), dogged with positional contingencies. I traveled in with trepidation, constantly worried about and uneasy with “who” was going with my “I’s” into the field. These worried selves came to be reinvented, because the identities that were attributed to me by my participants took center stage as I participated in their lives. My participants were Hindu women from my community (urban Punjabi women from North India, specifically south Delhi) who had chosen to be in arranged marriages. In particular, I had chosen to work with women who were married in the early 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, because I was interested in looking at experiences over time. My rationale for choosing these years was also socioeconomic. India liberalized its economy in 1991, thereby creating more jobs for both men and women in the urban workforce. In the past few decades, more and more women have entered the urban workforce (also true of my participants, who were both working and nonworking). Very few longitudinal studies of the impacts of such urban processes on family life are in process or yet available. As an ethnographer, I was interested in exploring the various facets of women’s marital experiences in different moments in the past 25 years. Therefore, I focused my ethnographic observations on women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s who had been married in the early 1980s, early 1990s, and early 2000s.

This demographic and symbolic difference, preset by me, became important in how I found myself addressed by each woman and each group. This, in turn, shaped my analysis of their stories. My field identities became a three-step dance, because at different moments in the field, I experienced my participants as comrades, as uncomfortable strangers, and as comfortable strangers. In the sections that follow, my goal is to explore my arrival at these three conceptual field relationships.

I begin these travels in a further past by problematizing my native and other selves: those created by historical, locational, and relational histories. I also discuss newer distances created by me for me to feel comfortable in the field. Following this, I focus on the eligibilities granted to me by different participants because of my status. As I do so, I enact what has come to be known in anthropology as the radical empiricist stance, which

stresses the ethnographer’s *interactions* with those he or she lives with and studies, while urging us to clarify ways in which our knowledge is grounded in our practical, personal, and participatory experience in the field as much as our detached observations. (Jackson, 1989, p. 3)

As I do so, I hope to show that in writing ethnography, we are often engaged in writing our own identities (see Berger, 2001).

Tiptoeing in: Multiple natives/multiple selves

I was born and raised in the Indian subcontinent, and my family has lived in Delhi for more than 50 years. Therefore, I am Indian, female, a “Delhite,” and a woman—an insider to any outside reader. Well, that is the short of it. The long of it is all of the following.

My father and his siblings were born in Pakistan and lived there until 1947. When India attained independence from the British in 1947, India was divided across into two nation states, secular India and Islamic Pakistan. My paternal family, which is Hindu, chose India over Islamic Pakistan and relocated to Delhi, the capital of modern India. This move from Pakistan, owing to political demarcations, gave them the status of refugees in their own country. I am the granddaughter and daughter of refugees. That is, I am Indian of Pakistani descent. I was born in India; I hold an Indian passport and find it easiest to introduce myself as such. In extended conversations, however, family history and our roots in Pakistan are never forgotten.

Such displaced beginnings also trail the maternal side of my family. My mother’s family were Indian merchants who lived and worked in Rangoon when Burma was a part of India (until 1942). My maternal grandmother was born in Mandalay. She, her parents, and five siblings stowed away to India on a vessel after the Japanese attack on Burma in 1942. She attended a Catholic school in Burma, still speaks Burmese, and considers Burma her home. Her children, my mother, and her two siblings know Burma from her stories. I could say that my grandmother is Burmese, but she is also Indian. Am I Burmese, Pakistani, or Indian?

I was born into these histories in the city of Delhi, the capital of India. In the ensuing years, between the ages of 3 and 23, I lived in eight different states within India. Although all of these states had different official languages, in all of them I studied in “English-medium” schools, institutions where the language of instruction is English. I became fluent in three languages, including English. I think, emote, dream, write, and feel most comfortable in English. It is my chosen first language, yet Hindi (the national language) remains my mother tongue.

Around adolescence, I went to the northern Himalayan foothills to study in a Catholic boarding school. I was a Hindu in this Catholic school. My home is a Hindu home in the way that daily life is lived. My mother is a devout Hindu who fasts once a week, pays regular visits to temples, has a small temple in the home, refrains from eating meat on Holy days, and does not touch beef (the cow being a sacred animal for Hindus). I admit I do not follow these rules, yet I refrain from eating beef or eating meat on holy days, and I do celebrate Hindu festivals such as *Diwali*, *Rakshabandhan*, *Holi*, and even *Lohri*. At the same time, I am also comfortable with and enjoy Easter and Christmas. In fact, I am more familiar with Catholicism than with the Hindu texts. Even so, when asked to identify, I tend to situate myself in Hindu-ness out of family loyalty, upbringing, and less so for reasons of religiosity.

As is evident from the “long of it,” these histories display the degrees of nativeness and otherness that I took with me into the field. Therefore, to state merely that I was north Indian and “part” of the Punjabi community would be simplifying the multiplex and varied identities and affiliations that I carried with me. Although I was attuned in to the otherness of my position, my speculation is that my participants did not see me this way, and I was “in” because I looked Indian, spoke Hindi and English, and lived in the community; I was “out” for reasons other than my above-explored identities.

In recent years, I have created new distances on my own. Having chosen to move away from India to study and work in the United States, I was geographically and temporally distanced from Delhi. When I reentered, I had lived away for almost 7 years (with short yearly visits that never lasted longer than 4 weeks). During this time, I had gained a few layers of academic and intellectual distance from the field,

because my formal training in anthropology and communication took place in the United States. My formal education was a few degrees (literally) apart from most of my participants, some of whom had finished high school, whereas others held undergraduate degrees. Three of my participants held master's degrees, and 2 were medical doctors.

In the field, I created other forms of outsidership which, albeit superficial, seem to be worth a mention here. These distances involved my choice of language and clothes while in the field. The urban Punjabi community in South Delhi speaks a mix of Hindi, Punjabi, and English. All the women in my study were comfortable in speaking both English and Hindi. Even so, I accessed my participants in English and began conversations with them in English, shifting to Hindi only if they desired it. I believe that in maintaining this choice for me, I was creating a form of distance. As I look back, I wonder if this choice to make myself seem unfamiliar was deliberate. I realize now that I made this choice in the hope that maintaining this distance would give them license to treat me as an outsider. I ask now, did this make their self-revelations easier?

Similar to language, my choice of clothes was kept deliberately Western, that is, I did not make an attempt to dress "native," choosing not to wear the *salwar kameez*, a popular Indian traditional outfit worn by younger and older women. Instead, I wore slacks, skirts, dresses, and so on. This was a "material" creation of distance. As with language, I think I had hoped that my participants would reveal more to someone who looked different—that they would not be afraid to confide or confess. As is typical of many middle-class Punjabi women, many of my participants wore jeans or slacks during our interactions, which included periods when I partook in their daily lives and when I audiotaped their life histories. In fact, the women's decision to wear Western clothes, in their marriages and for my study, became included in a Shared Experience, that of Performing Resistance. As I reflect on these matters now, new questions emerge: Did my clothes serve as an impetus to them to refer to their own? Had I worn Indian clothes, would this theme have shaped itself differently? Did the women who never wore Western clothes in front of me consider me an oddity? I remember that one participant commented on my "skinniness" and asked what I ate. I wonder if I created an unnecessary distance. I am also left wondering if the creation of these differences was authorial and othered me to my participants.

Distances of history, language, and clothes were material and marked instances of native and other for me in the field. Yet, there were other "unmarked" and covert positionalities that had emotional and relational dimensions, and there were burdens emanating from family life and family history.

Emotional disconnections: A partial insider

These unmarked aspects of my subjectivity were personal connections and disconnections in which I was enmeshed. Although I believe that political, historical, geographic, sensual, sexual, and intellectual displacements are entwined, in this space I have chosen to refer to them separately for reasons of clarity. I remained self-conscious about my emotional displacements before, during, and now even after the fieldwork, as they were immensely influential in the repositioning of my field selves.

These displacements enacted a tension between my overt outsidership as a researcher and my relational insidership. On the surface, emotionally, I was an outsider, as I had never experienced an arranged marriage, or a marriage, for that matter. I conducted the research as a single woman who had continuously refused an arranged marriage, although she was constantly pressed to entertain the option (perhaps, the choice of the word breach is appropriate here). This status was crucial to my experiences, because it framed my "eligibility" to do this research. I introduce here the concept of eligibility, because it resonates with the larger ethos of my study, which focused on women's stories about marital arrangements, processes in which eligibility is integral to the successful arrangement of a marriage. The women I interviewed narrated various criteria for eligibility (theirs, their kin's, their parents') for the men that they

married. For instance, a man was eligible if he was economically stable, professionally qualified, and held a good job. My participants articulated “who” was eligible to be married. As the study progressed, I came to believe that I, too, was being gauged in terms of my eligibility or lack thereof. This is to say not that I was being compared to men but that I was being evaluated on my eligibility to conduct research and, perhaps, for marriage.

By choosing to stay single and in choosing this context, I was in an ironic situation. In staying single, I had cast myself out, from a net of family relations and had made myself ineligible to some of my participants. For the native anthropologist, this feeling of unfamiliarity and a certain distance can be welcome, because it allows us to observe afresh what we would not see if we were too located; that is, it makes the familiar strange.

Despite this glaringly apparent otherness, I also experienced myself as a relational insider. I knew that I could not completely merge with the realities that I was exploring, yet having lived in India for all the first 23 years of my life, similar to my participants, I, too, had been socialized into “arranged selves”; that is, I carried with me a tacit understanding of their interior lives. I knew that I would share with them experiences of socialization despite our having been raised in different families. Despite our age differences, I also knew that we had all grown up believing that marriage was not merely a requirement but the final destination of our lives (see Chawla, 2004¹). My memories and ongoing experiences gave me an insider’s sensitizing frame. These frames were shaped by the heard, unheard, and often incomplete stories about the inner worlds of women around whom I grew up.

In my immediate family, I remained unexposed to an arranged marriage, as my parents had chosen each other. One could say that I was in a position of “born unfamiliarity” with the context. Yet, the familiar surrounded me. I have many aunts, cousins, and a few close friends who are living arranged marriages. I grew up hearing about these marriages. Some of my relatives were happy, some dissatisfied, and others were unhappy. I have an aunt who has been married for 30 years and is still dissatisfied with the marital choice made by her mother. On the other hand, I have cousins and friends who are living in seemingly successful arranged marriages.

There were still more familiarities related to my own socialization. When my participants spoke about parents who had encouraged them to be economically independent in the event that a marriage failed, I would nod vehemently in agreement (see also U. Narayan, 1997, for a discussion about middle-class Indian women and careers). I was trained to believe that my intellectual and/or professional journeys would be curtailed, because a marital life would always take precedence. When women spoke of how the mother-in-law had been created into a demonic figure for them by their mothers, I needed no translation. I, too, had been warned about misbehaving in front of my mother-in-law, who would be the matriarch ruling over me when I was married. These and many other memories converged with the recollections of my participants, and much of what I learned and interpreted shares a recursive relationship with my recollections about my arranged identities and those that I observed as I was growing up.

My relational insiderness was further heightened because of family circumstances. During the course of my fieldwork, my sibling (a brother who is 3 years older than I) made a decision to have his marriage arranged for him by my parents. Very early into my research process, I would become aware of the rules and norms for choosing the right bride. He and my parents visited different families to meet their daughters. Often we would invite these families to our home, and I would find myself an unwilling co-conspirator in the search process. I would be asked my opinion about the “eligibility” of some woman over others. I remember resisting this role and refusing to give my opinion. I felt sympathetic toward the women that my brother rejected on the basis of their physical appearance, intellectual capabilities, and, often, because they were unwilling to move to the city in which he was residing at the time. At the same

time, I was under pressure to have my marriage arranged. In fact, I, too, met with one prospective groom via my parents, here in the United States.

Having experienced, personally and vicariously, many of these meetings, I recall beginning to understand the importance of the first meeting as a formal meeting of the families (rather than a meeting “date” between the prospective bride and groom) in a neutral setting. This meeting functioned as a “screening” event, and its primary purpose was for the families to gauge each other’s eligibility. Later, I would use the term Enacting the First Meeting to discuss an across-cohort Shared Experience in the life histories. Although my participants’ stories included direct recollections of these first meetings, I know that I was somewhat sensitized to find them in the discourses.

A year after the first textual rendering of my fieldwork, my brother became engaged via an arranged match, and he was married recently. As well, my legal single-hood has now come to a close. I chose my own match and married very recently. For some, I have breached some more; for others, I am now an insider in the research context. I will become an insider by way of my status and stay an outsider by way of having chosen my own spouse. These current locations will, undoubtedly, create fresh lenses in my ongoing study, and my fieldwork will surely have a different archaeology when I return. Although the aforementioned are future conversations, they give credence to my argument about the complexities that constituted my ethnographic I’s (Ellis, 2003) in the field. Despite, these complex statuses, ultimately it was my unmarried status that came to shape my field identities and my interpretations.

Seeking stories: Framing new selves

In the field, my encounters with my participants did not proceed according to the preset demographics that I had chosen in the beginning. I met and interacted with women in different age groups as and when it was convenient for them to spend time with me. I was spending 4 months in Delhi, and the only reason for my visit that year was to engage in ethnographic participant observation and life history interviewing.

My time in the field was shaped by the everyday activities of my co-participants. My immersion involved a variety of unfamiliar tasks, such as driving with some women to pick up their children from school, listening to them about parenting teenage children, and sometimes even talking with their mother-in-laws while I waited for them. Other instances of participation involved familiar activities, such as eating meals with their families, going shopping with them if they asked me to, and often conversing with extended family members. In my work with a participant called Suparna,² I spent many moments with her husband and her 14-year-old son as she completed her household chores and got ready for our conversations in the mornings. These everyday activities were sometimes awkward for me, because I have lived alone for long time. Up to that point, my visits home were yearly and involved staying with my parents for a few weeks, or a month at best, so in some ways, even familial activities presented themselves to me with degrees of unfamiliarity.

This closeness with the families brought with it other noteworthy dimensions. One representative incident comes to mind. I remember eating lunch at a participant’s (Deeya) home. Her mother, her married sister, her single brother, and two cousins who were visiting also joined us. During lunch, I remember Deeya’s family interrogating me about the study, and as I explained it to them, they asked me to talk about other women’s stories. This was my first experience of developing a new distant “garb”—I became secretive, elusive, and noncommittal, as I was conscious of divulging information about other women’s lives. In fact, many of my participants wanted to know about other participants and compare stories. I learned to create another self when I encountered these questions. My answer was cautiously constructed as “There is a mix of sad, happy, and satisfied stories.” Such dilemmas continued outside of my field sites, because when I would return to my parents’ home in the evenings, my father (who is retired from a professional life) would ask me about the fieldwork and the interviews. My mother, on the other hand, wanted nothing

to do with any of my field stories. Speculatively, I feel that she has always been wary of my choice of research as it conflicted, with her desire to have my brother and me married. I learned not to talk about the stories, needing to protect them as much as I could.

I invented ways of creating ethnographic distances with my as well as my participants' families, all the while seeking ways to establish rapport—a much-debated necessity in life history interviews—with my participants (see Springwood & King, 2001, for a nuanced discussion of rapport in critical ethnography). This closeness became a relationship that shaped who I became in my association with my various participants. In the following section, I illustrate and explore the different ways in which I was shaped by my participants. I access the interview narratives to illustrate my shifting positions.

Differentiated selves: Among friends/being comrades

I remember being very excited about meeting Geeta, a 27-year-old woman who had chosen an arranged marriage. She was introduced to me by the friend of an acquaintance. Demographically, she belonged to the Younger cohort of women, who had been married in the early 2000s. The reason for my eagerness to meet her was Geeta's choice of profession. She worked as a sexual rights activist in a nongovernmental organization that focused on areas of sexuality, sexual harassment, sexual rights, and so on. To me, her decision to have an arranged marriage and to work in the area of sexual rights seemed contrary to each other. I suppose, stereotypically, I had expected all of my participants to be involved in somewhat conventional professions that complemented their roles as wives, such as teachers or part-time workers. I readily admit that my preconceived notions were shaken not only by Geeta but also the other participants in the Younger group, most of whom were working women: medical doctors, journalists, activists, and homemakers. My primary focus here is on Geeta because I believe she represents well my experiences with women in her group.

We had begun meeting at her workplace, because Geeta lived in an extended family with her parents-in-law, and she felt that I would experience her more “fully” as an individual in the place where she worked. One of our formal audiotaped interviews took place on a very warm May morning. I remember that the temperature that day was expected to reach 110°F. We had arranged to audiotape the interview in Geeta's office. Our conversation began on a light note. As I reviewed the study with her, Geeta laughingly chided me, saying, “Ah, you are trying to figure out if you want to do this yourself.” I denied it vehemently, spoke a few serious sentences about the goals of my project, and then could not help but join in the laughter. I recall telling Geeta, “Sometimes research is a personal search and I may or may not like what I find.” And so began the 2½-hour interview with Geeta, a conversation whose atmosphere came to symbolize the mood and the lightness of all my interactions with the Younger group. I knew I was talking with friends when we would banter, share jokes, and even laugh at some of the social rules that all of us had rebelled against. Memories of these rules seemed to resonate among us: sundown curfews, appropriate clothing, and directives against dating, among others.

Similar to Geeta, other women in her group were generous with their time and would often take time off from their workday to spend it with me. For instance, Jhumpa, another 27-year-old woman, would meet with me after work. She was a journalist, who spent long hours filing stories from the field. Yet, she would call me at the end of her day, and we would meet in her home. Radhika, a medical doctor, would also telephone me at the end of the workday and I would go over to her home and stay until the evening as she multitasked, spending time with her 2-year-old son and participating in my research. Anita, a homemaker, busy with two children, would leave them at home and meet me in different parts of the city to share her stories. Most of the Younger women were eager to participate in the interview, because they considered it an important contribution. Many of these women willingly led me to others in their own demographic.

As my fieldwork progressed, I began to view these women—whom I came to refer to as the Younger group—as comrades. Not only did I share a sociocultural historical decade and generation (I turned 29 in the field) with them, I felt most “located” in the field when I participated in their life history narratives. I came to see my participation with them as unselfconscious and egalitarian. Although I felt compelled stay a little on the outside, I found myself recollecting my own childhood years. For instance, when many of them discussed what they had thought of marriage as little girls, I remembered similar stories from my own life. When Geeta told me about a girlhood incident at the age of 3½, when she became aware that she would inevitably be married one day, I shared with her my experience of being told, at the age of 4, that I would be married one day. For the most part, I shared my experiences with them in conversation, very rarely interrupting their audiotaped interviews, as I wanted to enable the process of memory recall that they were engaged with when recollecting their life for me.

I came to see my position with the Younger group women as one of “hyper eligibility,” because I experienced them as women who were charge of their lives in emotional or economic ways. They “owned” their marital stories and I owned my single-status story. Not one of them questioned me about my single status, my choice of career, or my research. My single-hood was not in question. In fact, belonging to the same generation, we shared a sense of humor about the social lives we were living. For instance, with Geeta I laughed about my parents’ struggles to get me married. She mentioned, tongue-in-cheek, that they wanted to see me “settled,” a very common word used by middle-class Indian parents to disparage their children’s unmarried status. We came to discuss the meaning of the word settled as a sort of exile and imprisonment, a constant location. On a more somber note, Geeta also revealed to me instances of abuse as a child. This was something that I excluded from her life story, but the act itself showed how I was treated as a comrade, an insider, and a friend. Alongside, it showed a woman who was aware of and willing to talk through incidents that had shaped her growing years.

With Jhumpa, a journalist, I even found myself exchanging tips about make-up. In our initial meetings, we had spoken of my past career as a journalist, and she asked my help in contacting a newsperson with whom I was acquainted. I did do so with as much expediency as possible, as I would with any friend. With Radhika, a doctor, I went back and forth, creating a meaning for the word *radical* and how our parents considered us radical. In the process of our conversations, Radhika revealed to me that she had broken a prearranged engagement because things did not seem right to her and the man in question had not been supportive of her ideologies. As a female doctor, she had very strong views on the patriarchal structure of the medical profession and would not hesitate to participate in strikes and marches against sexual harassment in the workplace. When her ex-fiancé questioned these choices, she broke the engagement with support from her parents. She said she held strong views about a few things, and although her now husband was supportive, her parents-in-laws had been unprepared for her vocal views on such matters. I quote our conversation below:

Radhika: Probably even they were not expecting such a radical daughter-in-law. And I never warned them about me.

Devika: How did they come to know you were radical?

Radhika: Actually I am not very radical, in that sense . . .

Devika: Okay in comparison to a lot of conventional people, we want to consider ourselves radical. Although I don’t find myself radical if I was to compare myself with you, but compared to my mom I am radical.

Radhika: Yes, that’s what I mean. See, these people [my in-laws] have a very traditional concept of about a daughter-in-law.

Devika: What are their concepts?

Radhika: Umm... See if I don't like somebody then I don't like sitting with that person and talking with that person even if it is a close relative. I am polite to them. I am never rude to anybody, but they cannot expect me to sit and chat with them. For me, if something is wrong it is wrong and I will not support it or be party to it. I don't know, but maybe you've been out for some time because in some traditional Punjabi families there are some traditional aspects of it that really suck.

Devika: Give me some more instances.

Radhika: Instances like . . . there will be a festival and because I am the daughter-in-law I am supposed to be sitting with them and entertaining them the whole day. Or entertaining my husband's sister who is visiting. And why should I do that? She comes here, enjoys herself, and should let me be on my own. I can sit with her for a half hour or an hour. I'll serve her food and I'll do whatever it is. I can't spend time with them the whole day. It's not that I don't like you, but I can't just sit and keep discussing jewelry and clothes all the time. I am so much happier with my own little nice good book. I don't like people to come and disturb me. I'm actually more happier on the weekend with my good book or a nice movie or just spending time with my son and husband. Going to a nice art gallery. I'm not such a social person and I will not meet every aunt and uncle and pretend that I will miss them.

Radhika was clarifying what it meant for her to be radical inside the home. At the same time, she was displaying a self that was trying hard to maintain its autonomy in an extended family. In the process of reframing what we meant by radical, Radhika was also defining her marriage as a relationship with her husband and son, and not a relationship with his entire family. In other words, our collaborative effort to understand "radical" helped me to understand the notions of autonomy and differentiation—the strongest marital characteristics displayed by women in this cohort.

After my fieldwork, when I was enmeshed in transcribing, analysis, and reading through my observations, I came to interpret these collaborative maneuvers as constructions of differentiated selves, both mine and theirs. The stories I heard were focused on girlhood, early marital experiences (as most of them had been married fewer than 5 years), and marital negotiations that involved carving a separate unit for themselves and their husbands in their homes. Later, in my textual analysis, I came to refer to these Younger group woman as Differentiated Selves, women who had chosen arranged marriages but were negotiating family life on their own terms and were self-conscious about doing so. Alternatively, my experiences with the Middle group women were in stark contrast to "my" cohort, because my outsidership was reinforced. In the following reflections, I have chosen (as previously) to focus on a representative story and incidents to address my position with the Middle group.

Adjusting selves: An "uneasy" stranger among strangers

It was a hot morning in early June when I reached Suparna's home for one of our formal interviews. Suparna was a Middle group participant; she was in her late 30s and had been married for 17 years. It was 10 in the morning, and her husband, an accountant, was getting ready to leave for work. Her 14-year-old son was hovering in the background. I was told that she was getting ready, so her husband and I drank some tea and chatted about my life in America. Almost all my participants and their families were curious about how I coped with living "alone," as it is still quite unusual (even unlikely) for Punjabi middle-class women to live alone before they are married.

When Suparna was ready, she greeted me with immense warmth and asked me if I would eat something. I explained my interview protocol to her. All this while, I knew she was scrutinizing me. She asked her son to leave the room, which he did reluctantly. We tested my microphone. Suddenly, she leaned forward and told me, “I like you.” A bit surprised at this display of affection (as we barely knew each other), I let out an embarrassed laugh. Our interview began.

What was going on in Suparna’s mind when she told me she liked me? Although I was flattered, I did think it somewhat odd that she would be so adolescently direct in her experience of me, which until that point was limited. The next 3 hours confused me even further. Had I participated in a life history telling, or was it a conversation that had skipped in multiple directions? My selves had somersaulted from likeable researcher, to insider, to uncomfortable stranger, and all this occurred in this one telling of her story.

Suparna’s marital story was an unhappy one. She had been forced to leave her undergraduate degree unfinished and marry her husband on the counsel of her mother’s spiritual guru. This priest had told her family that Suparna’s horoscope was a perfect match with her intended. Yet, the family she married into was economically not as stable as her own. On her marriage, she lived in a small house, which they shared with her husband’s parents. As Suparna told it, the first few years of her marriage were tedious and chore-like. She was required to wake up early in the morning, cook, and generally take care of the house, tasks she was unused to, and even unequipped to do because she had not been required to do these in her natal home. Her reluctance to do these activities had resulted in conflict with her mother-in-law, who expected her to share in the household duties. This conflict led to uneasiness in Suparna’s marital relationship as her husband supported his mother over her. When I met Suparna, she had been unhappy in her marital life for many years.

I understood Suparna’s story as one of blame and neglect. First, she blamed her mother, who had not taught her how to take care of a home. Then she blamed her mother-in-law, who had demanded servitude and labor in the home. Finally, she blamed her husband, who had failed to support her. In the first part of her story, Suparna blamed the people in her life. Yet, she shifted her story midway and began to praise her husband’s generosity and goodness. I believe that she did so because she was unable to cope narratively with losing emotional control over her story. Thus, she reframed her narrative to a happy story about her life with her husband, who eventually moved them to a new house (even then, her mother-in-law continued to be a presence). In making this maneuver, Suparna seemed to take narrative charge of her telling. Once she had done so, she used this stronger position to interrogate me, the interviewer, about my marital choices. She asked me why I was unmarried and if my parents were worried. In fact, she even evinced disapproval that it was I, and not my brother, who was settled in America, thereby implying that as a daughter, I ought to have stayed behind.

I felt uneasy, even angry that I was being prescribed marriage by someone who had just told me a harrowing story about an unhappy marriage. In fact, I had to remove myself from her life history for some time. I returned to it after some months of fieldwork and read it anew. I eventually came to view Suparna’s story as a trajectory that moved from the participant as victim, to the participant as controlled-teller, to the participant as aggressive interviewer. The following three excerpts display well these narrative adjustments and the final address aimed at the ethnographer:

Blames mother

I am angry that mother didn’t let me study, you know. She didn’t let me really do something in life. And then she went to her guru—she has a guru in Agra—Radhaswamy. Now, how is the guru supposed to know me or whatever? But then he says, “No, you go talk to Mr. Soni. The

father is in LIC and the son is doing CA. You talk to those people.” So, my mother was very excited with the fact that “Mere guru-ji ne rishta bataya [my guru-ji has suggested an arranged match]. So, it’s not a joke, it’s a big thing.” For her it was a big achievement, (sarcastic tone) you know. And when they [her family] met Mohit, my uncle really liked him because he talks very well and he is highly educated, you know, that makes a difference. But, they didn’t have a good house—not a decent living. I would just put it across as a secret, that they didn’t have a good decent living.

I was not even asked, yes or no—nothing. Because I was so much pressured by my mom who said, “Karni hai, guri-ji ne kaha hain [you have to do it, guru-ji has suggested it]. It’s not a joke, it’s a big thing.” So then, you know, I just thought once that he is looks a little mature [old], but I didn’t get a chance to say it. They had got mithai [sweets] and everything apne saath hi [already with them] because they thought, “Since this has been recommended by guru-ji, so let us do it.” Of course, photographs were exchanged. But, I was not even shown the photograph of the boy.

Blames parents-in-law and husband

Till date, he has that kind of, I would say, (pause) vibe in him that he will not answer back. He will not say anything to his parents. Even if they give me a spank on my face, he will not say anything. He would not say anything, so it was not a very pleasant relationship. We used to have a lot of fights because of my in-laws; he would not acknowledge his parents’ mistakes. He thought that his parents were the best. But that was for me to see, no? What they had done for me?

For 10-12 years, I worked like that; I stayed like that. It was a very sour relationship with my husband. Because my husband is a very balanced person, so our marriage continued because my parents never gave a backing to me (to leave him). Whenever I would tell my mother something, she would say, “Nahi adjust karo, aise hi hota hai” [no you have to adjust, it is always like this].

Praises husband

And today I will tell you that the backing for his mother is always there. I dare not say anything to his mom. But my relationship with him is tremendously good. Very good. I look forward for my marriage anniversary. It’s a very healthy sign. And if he is at home I am very happy. You know I look forward to weekends. I look forward to be alone with him. I look forward for days when the kids are also gone to their nani’s [maternal grandmother] house and I am alone in the house with him, sitting talking, and sipping tea together. Till date we have tea together, at 6 -7 a.m. in the morning. I like to walk with him. Everything together. After he’s back home, I want to be with him, then I don’t want to give any time to the kids. I love to be with him wherever he is.

Criticizes the ethnographer

Suparna: Don’t you want to get married?

Devika: I do, but not because I have to.

Suparna: But your parents don’t feel bad, they must be feeling that you are 29 and still single?

Devika: Yes, yes. My mother is always annoyed with me.

Suparna: That is what, you are thinking only about yourself. I always felt for my mother. You know there is a difference between your generation and mine.

That day, Suparna's story, which had begun as a compliment to me, concluded with my becoming the truant unmarried interviewer who was not sacrificing or traditional enough. I came to experience this pattern, which I later termed narrative adjustment, with the majority of the participants in this group. Confusion about my positions became my common experience with the Middle group participants. Each story displayed the following narrative trajectory: It would begin with the woman telling a victim story; trouble spots would unfold in the narrative; and then the story would be reframed to a comfort story. This would be done by reframing the relationship with the husband into a happy marriage and conclude with the eventual accusation about the researcher playing truant by not being wed.

Ultimately, it was my single-hood that made me the addressed. This third link in the narrative adjustment took place because of my presence and would undoubtedly have been different had I been married, divorced, non-Indian, or another. All the women compared their "lot" to mine and, in so doing, directly pointed out my stranger status. Thus, my outsidership was revealed to me very bluntly, and I came to see my position in this group as one of least eligibility. Of course, there were some literal reasons for this outsidership. Demographically, all the women were older than me by at least 8 years, they were mostly nonworking women, and had been married for more than 10 years. I was a stranger to their life-course, their daily lives, their decade, and their generation.

However, being positioned as a symbolic-outsider distanced me further, indeed, influenced my analysis. The women in this group were experiencing and had experienced unhappy marital stories that were anticipatory: unnamed, not owned, not reflected on. They were not in charge of their narratives, whereas I believe I came across as someone who owned her single-hood story. Therefore, our conversations were asymmetric in nature, as I was never embraced as someone who wanted to be empathetic to their life stories. Instead, I felt positioned as an outsider with better opportunities, a fact that was pointed out to me in the course of the interviews. From being the addressee, I came to experience myself as an "addressed" intrusive interviewer.

This positional disturbance and my unstable stature within the group led me to name this group adjusting selves. By being forced into their life histories in becoming addressed, I felt that I became a part of the adjusting narratives. Every time I read my notes and the women's stories for the analysis, I would wince against my unwed inclusion, which seemed to serve as a narrative foil and make many women feel better about themselves, because they were at least married and, therefore, advantaged.

Therefore my use of the verb *adjusting* came to have a few connotations. At first, it emerged from the literal shifts I experienced in the telling of the stories, but later I began to refer to it to describe these women's ambivalence thoughts about their marital lives. I came to also refer to adjusting as their selves in flux, because the constant narrative reframing displayed selves that were continuously being renegotiated in the telling of the stories, from victim to confident participant, to advisor. Later on in my analysis, the experiences that held these women together were related to my naming them as adjusting selves. I came to refer to these experiences in the following ways: Who is my Husband? Non-Defined Marital Relationship; Who Am I?: Searching for Selves; and Fluid Narrative Form: Between Sequence and Plot.

My representation of the Middle cohort as adjusting was contingent on my status. The angst of shifting positionalities I experienced on entering the field came to be played out in how I was approached by my participants' in this group. Undoubtedly, I have often wondered if their experience of me and their stories would have been different had my status been different. Would they have felt compelled to reframe their stories? I feel confident that my subjectivity was, to a large extent, responsible for the narrative forms that arose in these stories. This very shifting subjectivity also shaped my interactions with the Older group

women, whom I experienced in an altogether distinct way. I take you now to my explorations of these women in their 40s, who, I believe, owned their marital stories, because they seemed in charge of their told narratives.

Reflective selves: A “comfortable” stranger among strangers

I first met Sonia sometime in May. She lived a 5-minute drive from my parents’ home in Delhi and was acquainted to a family friend. Most of my time with Sonia was spent in her home, as she was a homemaker with two daughters, and spent most of her days looking after them and her home. In fact, much of our time in the afternoons was spent in her children’s room, where she relaxed with her daughters. On the day that I went to interview Sonia, I began my time in her home by drinking tea with her father-in-law, who lived with Sonia and her husband. Our conversation was pleasant. I remember briefly telling him about the study and discussing the rules for the card game bridge.

Drinking tea was a very large part of my experience of interviewing, because in North Indian homes, tea is brewed almost every hour. Most of my audiotaped interviews unfolded over many cups of *chai* (tea). I came to see the drink (also my preferred choice of a year-round warm beverage) a necessary condiment to the interview events and sites. Even when I did not feel like drinking it, I would agree to have a cup, because I knew it would make my participants comfortable and feel in charge in terms of hospitality (which is a cultural marker for the Punjabi community, as we are known mainly for our hospitality, love of entertaining, song and dance, and loudness).

My interview with Sonia also occurred over many cups of tea, which her older daughter would prepare for us. Sonia’s house had a central courtyard enclosed by all the main rooms in the house. Every time we met, she would lead me from the outside, in through the courtyard and into her house. Although the homes of all the Older group women were designed differently, this came to be a pattern in my experience of being in their homes. They would lead me from the outside into the inside, which was usually their children’s room (as was Sonia’s) and never into the bedroom they shared with their husband.

For me this movement came to symbolize many things. I note it here, because I believe it was significance in shaping my sense of this group, my experience of their told stories, and my positionality of an outsider in the group. I see these conversational spaces as symbolic choices that represent distance and control. In outlining their spaces, these women were sketching an exterior architectural frame from which they told their stories. This move also came to symbolize the extent to which I was allowed “inside” the stories of the Older group, and although I did not share a demographic similarity with the older women—they were all women in their 40s who had been married for at least 18 years—I felt as if I was led into their stories but remained outside of them emotionally. By this, I mean I did not become their friend or the addressed; I stayed a comfortable stranger, with whom they shared their stories in minute details with much control over their told narratives.

When I returned from the field, I began to recognize exterior and interior distances that were carved between us, both by them and by me. In these created spaces of reflection, sometimes I was almost not there; often, I was the observer; mostly, I was the comfortable stranger. This was so, because my Older group participants seemed to be recollecting a life that had already been reflected on, and perhaps understood. Although I was privy to the intricacies of their stories, I was subtly placed on the outside—in the rooms of their children—but this was an outside that never proved to be of any discomfort to any of us. I believe that in delineating this boundary, women in this group had created a necessary space of reflection for themselves.

For instance, although Sonia’s marital story was not always a happy one, she reflected about it in a healthy way, making connections between and among events as well as the people in her stories. Sonia

grew up in a small town in North India (about 300 kilometers from Delhi), and moved to Delhi on her marriage because her husband and his family lived there. Unfortunately, her mother-in-law passed away before her wedding, which put the burden of household duties entirely on Sonia's shoulders. Thus, she began married life inheriting the responsibility of taking care of a household and being an emotional anchor for a family mourning a lost mother. During these early years, Sonia felt very neglected by her husband, who, she felt, expected her to make such difficult transitions with ease. Over the years, she took charge of the home, developed a warm relationship with her father-in-law and her sister-in-law (and other extended family members), and was living a satisfied life that focused on her "family" as the center of her marriage. She defined herself as someone who always "helped" everyone. In fact, she positioned herself in the role of helper in my study, because she gave me access to many more women in her group—so much so that I had more participants than I had anticipated—so Sonia the helper in her marital story was Sonia the helper in my research story.

Although the women in the Older group differed from each other in experiences, similar to Sonia, all of them narrated life stories that enacted reflective selves who had made sense of their marital experiences. I experienced the stories as plotted narratives that were rendered chronologically yet told to me via turning points, plots, anecdotes, and internal commentary. Ultimately Reflected, Owned, and Adjusted were words that consistently came to my mind when I engaged with the Older group. These words - my first impressions of the group - remained consistent during the different layers of my interpretive analysis.

These reflections came as a surprise to me, because on entering the field, I had worried most about this particular group. In their early to mid 40s, most of the Older group participants were more than 15 years older than I, and, in fact, some of them were less than a decade younger than my mother. They had all been married in the early to mid-1980s. I had worried that owing to our demographic disparity, these women would be somewhat reserved. In fact, I was expecting them to chastise me about my unmarried status. Moreover, my experiences with the Middle group had made me even more wary about Older women. I traveled into their lives expecting to be disciplined. I expected "mothers" who would think of me as someone who was too young to entrust their marital stories to. I had worried about credibility and demographic and experiential distance, but instead I found that among these women, distance afforded comfort.

As my interviews with women in this group unfolded, I found myself leaving every interview with a "complete" feeling. I believe this came about because of the quality of form and experience of the stories that were narrated to me. Of course, they were not all happy stories, but they were told with coherence and reflective insights. I was not an insider to this group, but I was a welcome participant observer in the stories. I was neither too inside nor too outside. The participants positioned me as a comfortable outsider/listener/ researcher and, later on, even amateur counselor, because many of them laughingly challenged me to "rate" their marriages. I felt distantly respected as a researcher within this group of participants. This stance, attributed to me by my participants, revealed itself in one Unique Experience that emerged within this group: Interviewer as Amateur Counselor. I view this theme as one that emerged because I was considered "eligible enough" to reflect on "their" lives. Our asymmetry was not a hindrance and was instead an enabler. Thus, my final rendering of the narratives from this group were set in a calm tone. There was not much conflict between how I saw these women and how they saw themselves. Similar to my relationship with the Younger women, I had "hyper eligibility" with this group, but it was a different eligibility, because I was a comfortable stranger who remained on the outside.

Eligibility and legitimacy

In many ways, these shifting subjective experiences I encountered provide one case of the ethnographer's positional travels in one context. My experience cannot be taken to be the expected one, because our fields are ultimately (if we allow them to) shaped by the participants who populate them. I came to a

different understanding of what I had considered to be legitimacy to do the ethnography in which I became involved. This legitimacy was reframed by my participants into eligibility. Although I have co-opted both of these words, they mean different things. I associate legitimacy with legality and eligibility with relational processes, something I had to earn and was granted as my fieldwork progressed. With the Young group, I was accorded the role of native, thus hyper-eligible. With the Middle group, who adjusted their narratives, I, too, was adjusted: first as an insider, and later as an outsider and stranger. My eligibility was in question (inter actionally), just as their narratives were seeking coherence. With the Older group, I was “another,” a comfortable stranger, and, in more ways than one, the professional stranger of ethnographic work. Ultimately, I had to experience these eligibilities to reflect on and converse with their life-histories. More important, these eligibilities originated from my single status and not from my displaced or rooted ethnic identities, thus making my ethnographic representation and interpretation an exploration of multiplex subjectivities.

Notes

1. The field experiences and narratives engaged in this essay are a part of my dissertation study entitled, “Arranged Selves: Role, Identity, and Social Transformations Among Indian Women in Hindu Arranged Marriages” (Chawla, 2004).
2. All names and identifying information of participants have been changed to protect their privacy (in this manuscript as well as the dissertation study). This research was granted human subjects clearance and followed the Purdue University human subjects review guidelines for conducting interviews and ethnographic fieldwork.

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