



Arranging Love: Interrogating the Vantage Point in Cross-Border Feminism

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Arranging Love: Interrogating the Vantage Point in Cross-Border Feminism

The issues of cultural difference and relativism remain fraught ones in feminist teaching and research. Transnational feminists based in the United States have grappled with the question of how to work across national borders without reinforcing colonial tropes and practices (Mohanty 1988, 2003; Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 2001). Feminist scholars have criticized the way particular gendered practices of postcolonial societies are singled out as representing the society writ large, exoticized and sensationalized, while practices that are either more egalitarian or more familiar to a U.S. audience remain invisible. For example, they have eloquently critiqued discourses of sati and dowry (Narayan 1997, 1998), veiling (Abu-Lughod 2002), and female circumcision (Nnaemeka 2005). In my view, however, feminist scholars have yet to fully address the challenges of cross-border analysis.

Most people in the United States, including students, the general public, and some feminists, consistently overestimate their own agency in the face of discursive and institutional structures and underestimate that of women elsewhere—and this occurs in a contemporary U.S. context where agency defines personhood. Discourses of exaggerated cultural difference serve national interests, and feminist scholars have pursued various strategies to undo them. A conventional comparative approach that assumes cultures to be distinct from one another (only different entities are comparable) has led some scholars to highlight the empowering aspects of cultural practices in order to counter ethnocentric discourses about foreign (and domestic) others. For example, one might explore the political and

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emotional advantages of women's culture found in societies with a high degree of gender segregation. I consider much anthropological and area studies research done by U.S. scholars to be comparative even if the comparison with American society remains implicit. Such analyses present continuities with past practices and indigenous subcultures, but they have only recently begun to address the way traditions have changed over time in response to global forces. An explicitly transnational approach that sees neither cultures nor nations as isolated entities has led others to focus on change and historical linkages through colonial or more recent neoliberal policies. For example, one might look at the spread of companionate marriage ideals through missionary activity or gay and lesbian identities through globalization. These analyses offer a view of tradition as shaped by history and political economy, but they often leave intact the assumption that diversity and change are the results of colonialism, postcolonial modernization, or more recent globalization. Most cross-border feminist analyses explore either local diversities or transnational linkages, not both. Instead, we need to maintain a productive tension between these frames.

Feminist scholars must simultaneously address both the heterogeneities within the sites being compared and the historical linkages between them. I propose a three-part methodology that fulfills the multiple, even competing, agendas of cross-border feminist scholarship, and I illustrate the necessity for such a method with the example of arranged marriage. This method begins by interrogating the vantage point of analysis: in this case, romantic love is the taken-for-granted foundation for discussions of arranged marriage. Such a method then explores both diversities within the two sites of the comparison and transnational linkages between them.

Exaggerated difference

Arranged marriage exemplifies the problem of exaggerated cultural difference. It is constituted by both material needs and popular discourses of love, marriage, and family. It occupies the intersection of gender and nation, is described as an exotic cultural practice in the United States, and signifies "family values" in Indian communities. For these reasons, and because it has received less attention than analogical practices of female circumcision and veiling, it offers a good site for furthering a cross-border feminist method.

Although parental involvement in spousal choice is prevalent in much of the world today, arranged marriage has come to be particularly associated with India. Indeed, it has come to surpass even caste as a symbol of Indian culture, both subcontinental and diasporic. Arranged marriage

is central not only to externally imposed stereotypes of India but also to diasporic Indian identity, whether experienced positively or as a source of generational conflict (Baumann 1996, 153; Raj 2003, 106). As Sandhya Shukla writes in *India Abroad*, “Arranged marriages, in particular, are central to the production of meaning of ethnic community in a variety of ways. Not only do they describe a basic form of reproduction of that community and retention of certain forms of membership, but they also function as hyper-symptoms of misrecognition between East and West, that which continues to make immigrant communities, especially in Britain and the United States, unknowable, exotic, and mired in tradition” (Shukla 2003, 223). Tensions between arranged marriage and romantic desire are pivotal to the narratives and humor of many blockbuster Hindi films and most Indian diasporic films.¹ India often serves as the referent in U.S. discussions of arranged marriage, and so I write “India” when presenting U.S. discourses about arranged marriage. My preference, however, is to speak of “South Asia,” because the practices discussed below are not geographically distributed along national boundaries and because speaking of India (a country whose territory was drawn in 1947) discourages a longer historical view that includes precolonial and colonial eras. I focus primarily on U.S. discourses of India or South Asia because romantic love is more naturalized in the United States than in Europe.

More than a condensed symbol of the struggle between old and new worlds and between generations, arranged marriage has long stood as evidence of South Asian women’s lack of autonomy, emotional contentment, and sexual satisfaction. Arranged marriage is blamed for a host of social problems facing South Asian women in a way that assumes U.S. distinctiveness from the rest of the world.² The binary logic rests on a general East-West binary:

¹ Examples include *Hollywood/Bollywood*, *Pardes*, *ABCD*, *Hyderabad Blues*, and *American Desi*. Deepa Mehta’s Hindi-language but internationally marketed *Fire* (1996) suggests that it is the dismal nature of arranged marriage that pushes two sisters-in-law to turn to each other for emotional and erotic intimacy. While exposing the contours of Indian heteronormativity, *Fire* also reinforces stereotypes of arranged marriage as loveless, empty, patriarchal, and without choice. Mira Nair’s recent *The Namesake* (2006) is exceptional in avoiding stereotypes of arranged marriage. Conventional Hindi cinema, in contrast to both Mehta and Nair, presents a positive image of arranged marriage that incorporates heterosexual romance and companionate ideals along with parental authority, solidarity of patrilineal joint families, and national and religious endogamy.

² Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen (1997) argue that, geographically speaking, the idea of the East has taken two very different historical trajectories in the discourses of culture and political economy. The East of cultural discourse has migrated steadily eastward from the Levant to India and now China, a discursive move that has maximized the distance

<i>Arranged Marriage</i>	<i>Love Marriage</i>
Tradition	Modernity
Authority of kin	Individual choice
Social mobility	Emotional and sexual fulfillment
Women as commodities	Women as agents
Rationality	Irrationality

This logic recalls familiar orientalist discourses on East and West, with one difference: when it comes to marriage, the otherwise “irrational” East suddenly becomes instrumental and pragmatic in the one domain where, according to Western ideals, rationalism should not apply. Indians are too otherworldly where they should be economically minded (though this stereotype is now changing with India’s recent economic successes) and far too calculating in matters of love and marriage. Even when arranged marriage is treated sympathetically, as it is in news articles that blame high U.S. divorce rates on unrealistic romantic expectations, the binary remains intact. One problem, I argue below, is that discussions of arranged marriage begin with a notion of romantic love free from pragmatic considerations and structural constraints, and this pure category of love then becomes the basis for asking questions about love in Indian marriage. Mobilizing research on American romantic love for an analysis of arranged marriage reveals that discourses of exaggerated difference incorrectly render romance unique to Western modernity.

Arranged marriage as premodern and patriarchal

There is no consensus among historians on when exactly love marriage first emerged in Western Europe, but it is clear that the gradual shift toward marriage for love is tied up with the notion of choice. Stephanie Coontz notes that since ancient times elites manipulated marriage for political and economic advantage, and lower-class people needed to marry for survival. Both groups married for practical considerations, not for personal fulfillment or love (Coontz 2005, 66–69). As early as the twelfth

between Europe and its exotic other. Meanwhile, the East of political economy has migrated westward to include Russia, Eastern Europe, and even Germany. This move allowed Europeans west of that boundary to disown the uglier episodes of what is in fact a shared political history. In both trajectories, metageography has served the interests of preserving a sense of a distinctive Western civilization, even as the core of the West has shifted from one side of the Atlantic to the other (Lewis and Wigen 1997, 62).

century, the Church's doctrine of mutual consent provided some support to those who resisted pressure from parents or social superiors, for a determined young couple could force the Church to recognize their marriage. However, parents not only controlled economic resources such as dowry for daughters and livelihood for sons, they were also free to use physical restraint and violence. Thus, most young people of all classes followed their parents' marital agendas (Coontz 2005, 116–17). Indeed, Coontz argues that marrying for political and economic advantage remained the norm well into the eighteenth century (123) even though the Church and legal doctrine upheld the idea of marriage by consent much earlier. Regardless of the early existence of the idea of choice, the question remains: to what degree did structural factors determine choice?

Historians seem to agree that marriage by choice and for love became the new ideal in Europe and North America during the eighteenth century but offer various reasons for its triumph—including Christian ideas of holy matrimony, the privatization and secularization of family life, the expansion of wage labor, and Enlightenment concerns with the pursuit of happiness. Lawrence Stone (1979) argues that the Puritan experiment of the mid-1600s left several legacies to the more secularized British society that followed. Puritans' stress on holy matrimony was ultimately incompatible with the patriarchal authority they also endorsed. Fathers could not directly control a child's choice of marriage partner if the couple was to be bound by love and affection. Late seventeenth-century nonconformists led the demand for children's freedom in choice of spouse (Stone 1979, 176). Coontz attributes the emergence of the love match in the eighteenth century to both the spread of wage labor, which made young people less dependent on parents, and Enlightenment values of reason and the pursuit of happiness. Marriage came to be seen as a private, secular contract between two autonomous individuals (Grossberg 1985, 24) that should not be too heavily regulated by the state or church (Coontz 2005, 145–47). If the inability to support a family or social pressure did not deter a young couple, then few legal barriers existed in the nineteenth century (Grossberg 1985, 108).

The gradual shift toward consent and then love marriage was seen as a move toward greater gender equality. In early modern England (1660–1800), the shift away from marriage explicitly arranged by kin was understood as an attack on patriarchal authority in the family (Stone 1979, 164–91). Although the movement against arranged marriage in England was seen as an early example of feminist activism, scholars (see O'Hara 2000) have debated the degree of free choice that actually existed in courtship and love marriage for various classes; women still needed mar-

riage for material support. Most Europeans came to accept that marriage should be based on love, reason, and mutual obligation rather than a husband's arbitrary will, but only a few radicals like Mary Wollstonecraft called for complete equality within marriage (Coontz 2005, 148–49). Coontz notes that love marriage was not intended to create egalitarian unions; instead, it was aimed at making the institution more secure by addressing cynicism about mercenary marriages and by encouraging loyalty to spouses. In fact, most women became even more dependent on husbands as the division between men's wage-earning activities and women's domestic work grew (Coontz 2005, 149–55; see also Cancian 1986). Despite the persistence of material constraints, love marriage continued to be seen as an attack on the coercive power of fathers and husbands.

In the American colonies, marriage was regulated and community and parental approval upheld, but a formal arranged-marriage system never existed (Farrell 1999, 96), and unsettled conditions generally allowed for more evasion of rules (Coontz 2005, 138). Even where individuals were allowed to make their own marital choices, most children accepted parental supervision of courtship, both because the personal and economic consequences of defying a parent could be severe and because the definition of marital companionship was limited (Coontz 2005, 138–40). Nevertheless, relatively recent European settlement and lack of a formal system of arranging marriages, as well as Protestant emphasis on affectionate conjugal bonds, may mean that marriage for love became more naturalized in the contemporary United States than in Europe, especially as romantic and then sexual love became more important for marriage in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The emergence of new marriage ideals is coincident with the rise of values of individualism, choice, and equality in Western modernity. Twentieth-century debates about the incompatibility of passionate love and the institution of marriage have been framed in terms of modernity, even though this question was debated in Europe beginning in the twelfth century (Arni 2004). According to Caroline Arni, at the beginning of the twentieth century in German-speaking countries, love gained authenticity as an egalitarian—and modern—relationship between individuals who chose mates based on personal characteristics, not for material interest, social convention, or stability. Modern society (urban, industrial, secular, individualistic) was defined in contrast to premodern European societies and exotic, non-European ones (Arni 2004, 202–3). Today marriage by choice and for love is seen as the foundation of the modern nuclear family.

In the United States today heterosexual marriage is explicitly framed

in terms of choice, but I suggest that these discussions of choice are implicitly about romantic love. Discourses of heterosexual love emphasize expression of feelings and deny instrumental qualities such as material help or routine cooperation (Cancian 1986). Since Western modernity defines love as pure emotion divorced from pragmatic and market concerns, systems of marriage that encompass both instrumental and affective elements are necessarily cast as nonmodern. Romantic love, as the background for discussions of arranged marriage, is a useful point of entry, for it is deeply implicated in constructions of Western modernity. It is presumed to be unique to Western modernity—and thus new to South Asia. A comparative or third-world feminist approach tends to frame social changes in terms of tradition and modernity. Transnational critiques have argued that feminism presents itself as originating in Western modernity and equates tradition with gender inequality. Transnational models tend to acknowledge global structures of power that underlie the very concepts of tradition and modernity, but they alone are insufficient to the task of undoing putative differences between arranged and love marriage. Strands of transnational feminism that concern themselves with practices linked to recent globalization, even if to critique them (see Grewal and Kaplan 2001, 664), risk misconstruing romantic love as new to South Asia.

Interrogating the vantage point

What exactly is meant by romantic love? Insofar as U.S. discourses and practices of romantic love remain the unexamined vantage point from which we evaluate marriage elsewhere, feminist analyses of Indian arranged marriage will remain inadequate to the task of undoing discourses of difference. We must begin with a contrasting situation in the United States that has been researched and documented (see di Leonardo 1998, 16, 28–29)—rather than taking culturally specific categories such as love as the basis for cross-border analysis—and then explore both transnational processes and variation across both past and present South Asian contexts. Such a method not only reveals diversities, ambivalences, and historical shifts in U.S. notions of love, sex, and marriage but also requires us to distinguish constituent elements of romantic love that tend to be conflated in contemporary U.S. romantic narratives: sexual desire, eroticized romance, idealized romance, companionate marriage, heterosexuality.

These elements, once disentangled, become visible in various South Asian contexts, though in unfamiliar combinations.

Romantic love as distinct from sexual pleasure

Although contemporary U.S. popular culture tends to equate romantic love and sexuality, they were different modes of feeling in the nineteenth century. Steven Seidman (1991) argues that love and sex were deemed antagonistic but that both were seen as good for marriage. Since sex was thought to incite sensuality that could destroy the spiritual essence of marriage, Victorians desexualized love and desensualized sex (Seidman 1991, 7). Through sentimental marriage Victorians embarked on a new social experiment to make marriage the pivotal experience in people's lives and conjugal love the main focus of all their emotions and obligations (Coontz 2005, 177). Marriage was idealized as an emotional, if not sexual, relationship.

During this period, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975) has shown, romanticized friendships between women were common, sensual, and embedded in a female social world. These relationships involving physical, if not necessarily genital, contact were acceptable, and such arrangements were compatible with and complementary to heterosexual marriage. They existed along a spectrum of human emotions that included love, sensuality, and sexuality (Smith-Rosenberg 1975, 27). Anthony Rotundo (1989) has argued that during the same historical period boys also shared romantic friendships during their youth. Thus, in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, romantic relationships were not defined by marriage, genital sex, or heterosexuality.

The nineteenth-century antagonism between love and sex was soon eclipsed in the early twentieth century by a new era of romanticized sexuality as sentimental marriage shifted to sexual marriage (Coontz 2005). Sexual attraction came to be taken as a sign of love, the giving and receiving of pleasure a demonstration of love, and sustained sexual longing and satisfaction a condition of maintaining love; indeed, sexual satisfaction came to be fundamental to a successful marriage (Seidman 1991, 66).

If the relationship between romantic love and sexuality is contingent even in the United States, how can romanticized sexuality serve as a category for cross-cultural analysis? Distinguishing sexual desire and romantic love prompts us to ask new questions about the existence of both in South Asia. Beyond the more familiar romanticization of Bollywood movies and Valentine's Day celebrations, we can also consider narratives of sexual pleasure, both classical and folk, as well as romantic practices that have a long history in the region, including courtesan culture, classical poetry, and Hindu myth.

The political economy of dating, romance, and desire

Research on American intimacy also documents the shifting relationship between dating and romantic love. The lack of a comparable system of dating in South Asia is often cited as a reason for the persistence of arranged marriage. Moreover, this lack is attributed to cultural ideologies of female chastity, effacing economic forces that have shaped dating practices elsewhere. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman (1988) note that in the early nineteenth-century United States courtship took place in the context of rural family life. Rural, frontier, and southern youth interacted, with evidence of premarital sexual activity, in work, community, or church groups that were public and heterosocial. Their working-class counterparts in urban areas also socialized in public venues, though these were more likely to be beaches or carriage rides than community events. During this same period, white middle-class courtship was becoming a private affair of calling on people at home, and the specialized parlor in Victorian homes enabled this privatization (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988, 73–75).

By the early twentieth century, courtship had changed: hay rides had been free, but dating required money. The word “date” soon emerged to describe an event that took place in the public sphere away from home and came with monetary expenses (Coontz 2005, 199). Eva Illouz (1997) argues that urban middle- and upper-class courtship came to be defined by dating rather than calling as a direct result of expanded leisure activities. By the 1940s going out to movies or dance halls in heterosexual couples (rather than in groups) was common; it had replaced not only the formal urban practice of calling but also the informal rural gatherings of small-town youths. The cultivation of ideal romance required costly luxury goods like automobiles. As men competed in their ability to provide amusement, women competed in sexual allure. Etiquette books were guides to social mobility, but familiarity with high-status forms of consumption had to be accompanied by financial and cultural capital (Illouz 1997, 54–74). Thus, contemporary American dating practices emerged from the spread of wage labor, the privatization of the nuclear family, the rise of a heterosocial youth culture, and the commodification of leisure activities. If this new system of dating elevates the heterosexual couple to the very foundation and center of a nuclear family unit separate from community and extended kin, this does not mean that choices are made without pragmatic or economic considerations in the U.S. context.

The political economy of dating shows that U.S. notions of compatibility are sociologically constructed, even if rhetorically personalized in everyday language. Dating freed young people from direct adult super-

vision and, in this sense, facilitated an individualized experience of autonomy. However, dating generally maintained rather than subverted class relationships, and even today most Americans marry within their socio-economic class. Even when they marry exogamously, as with U.S. men who seek Filipina or Russian brides on the Internet, they tend to do so in ways that reinforce lines of gender, class, and geopolitical inequality. In other words, as marital rhetoric shifted from material concerns to those of love from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the role of marriage in social reproduction remained fairly stable.

It is not my claim that U.S. citizens are in fact motivated by self-interest but delude themselves with romantic fantasies. Rather, I wish to emphasize the ways in which romantic sentiment is itself structured by economic and social organization in both the United States and South Asia and that notions of compatibility in these two contexts are comparable if not identical. For example, rituals of consumption related to beauty and leisure define sexual allure, and cultural capital is central to statements of personal compatibility (“we both love opera”). What is alluring about a love for opera and to whom is it alluring? Popular culture in the United States defines falling (accidentally and without motive?) in love as separate from social structure; indeed, evidence of overt or structural coercion negates its authenticity. Replicating this popular discourse, scholars have tended to associate romantic love with individualism and modernity without noting its role in social reproduction.

Nonheterosexual romantic narratives are not exempt from this dynamic. Ellen Lewin argues that the authenticity of lesbian and gay weddings is sometimes confirmed by the perception that they are not the result of social pressure and convention (1998, 163). “Over and over,” writes Lewin, “couples laughed as they reminded me that they could hardly be accused of getting married to please their parents or get a lot of gifts, while others occasionally joked about ‘having’ to get married to legitimate their offspring. Voluntary behavior is seen, in this construction, as springing from the heart, as being pure and uncontaminated by the desire to gain some benefit from a course of action” (163). In this view, shared by U.S. citizens of diverse sexualities, arranged marriage results from social pressure and convention and thus cannot include authentic sentiments of love.

Research on heterosexual courtship (Illouz 1997), romance tourism (Sánchez Taylor 2001), and transnational marriage (Constable 2003) suggests that romantic desire is structured by economics and various forms of inequality, even while discourses of love as springing from the heart affirm U.S. culture as the realm of free choice. That which is attractive

or sexy is inseparable from financial and cultural capital, just as racial difference may be eroticized in colonial and touristic encounters. Yet love is thought to transcend pragmatic and material concerns, and its association with free choice makes it central to discourses of Western modernity.

Marriage patterns result not only from preferences but also from opportunity (Kalmijn 1998, 397). People in the United States tend to date those whom they meet in their immediate social world. To the extent that people are segregated by social network, neighborhood, school, and workplace, they will tend to date people who are much like themselves and to marry endogamously.³ Sociological studies demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of Americans marry those who share their values, opinions, taste, and knowledge (see Kalmijn 1998, 399) and those within their own socioeconomic class and ethnic identity—without direct parental control (see O'Brien and Foley 1999, 145). Financial and cultural capital, the construction of desire in the economy of romance, and the workings of various institutional mediators combine to shape romantic sentiment. Romantic and sexual desires are neither irrational nor isolated from pragmatic considerations. While alternative, cynical views of romance and marriage circulate widely in the United States, such as those that liken the role of wife to that of a prostitute, they remain subversive and do not inform stereotypes of arranged marriage as a point of cultural difference.

Pure agency and the role of kin, community, and state

The binary view of arranged marriage and romantic love prevents us from exploring the role of kin in spousal choice in the United States, on the one hand, and the role of emotion in South Asia, on the other. Anthropologists have tended to associate arranged marriage with kinship-based societies where parental interest in children's marital choices has to do with status and economic security. According to Kimberly Hart (2007), scholars argue that kin-controlled marriage gives way to individualism, urbanization, modernity, and the love match. Thus, according to this view, arranged marriage persists in South Asia because most children remain dependent on parents to get a start in life and most elderly parents depend on children for security. Indeed, for most South Asians today, the functions of marriage and family have not been supplanted by state or private pension funds.

Even where the Christian and legal doctrine of mutual consent prevailed

³ The boom in Internet dating services may require us to rethink the limitations of institutional mediators, but the phenomenon is too new and the research too sparse to allow for any conclusions.

in Europe, we have seen that parents had powerful means of controlling marital choice. While the United States upheld mutual consent in the nineteenth century, the state regulated marriage through various legal prohibitions including want of reason, lack of free consent, impotence, consanguinity, affinity, and, particularly in the post-Civil War period, race (Grossberg 1985, 104, 129). Moreover, despite official emphasis on free choice, individuals tended to make choices within certain social parameters. As critic Abba Woolson confidently stated in 1873, “Calculating parents in foreign lands bind their sons and daughters . . . while the American people are sensible enough to allow their children freedom of choice. . . . The young minds among us become so thoroughly imbued with the ambitions of their elders that there is no need to interfere” (quoted in Grossberg 1985, 108). Ideologies of romantic love obfuscate the role of the state and a historical shift from external restraints to self-surveillance in marital choice.

Romantic ideals also erase the continuing role of kinship in love marriage, as in the development and persistence of upper-class Boston elites from the beginning of industrialization to the early twentieth century. Elite Boston families ensured their class continuity through the marriages of their sons and daughters in an era when even upper-class marriage had become more subject to individualistic norms of romantic love that originated in the middle classes (Farrell 1993, 83, 105). From the middle of the nineteenth century, a set of institutions (country clubs, educational, and cultural institutions) reinforced residential concentration, and the insularity of elite social circles meant that children’s marriages were socially and economically endogamous without direct parental intervention (Farrell 1993, 83). As individual choice and romantic love became more pronounced among elites, families created new and more subtle ways to shape those choices without direct intervention (84). By exploring the role of kinship and marriage in class consolidation, Betty G. Farrell also demonstrates the larger economic significance of women’s domestic lives, even in the context of an ideology of separate spheres that denied women’s economic contribution (1993, 78). This suggests that we should ask questions about both the involvement of kin and pragmatic concerns for various classes and social groups: Do elites everywhere exhibit more parental involvement in marital choice? What direct and indirect means do kin employ to ensure that their children marry compatible persons, and to what extent do children themselves assume this responsibility? Finally, how do constructions of compatibility evoke intertwined economic, social, and psychological realities?

Unpacking American romance

While acknowledging the subversive possibilities of romantic love, I highlight the role of market forces and pragmatic concerns in shaping romantic desire. This intervention is necessitated by popular U.S. idealizations of romantic love as transcendent, which then become the basis for (mis)understanding marriage in South Asia. Examining U.S. practices prompts us to separate various categories too often seen as constituting a romantic package: sexual desire, romantic idealization, heterosexuality, and companionate marriage.

Romantic idealization refers to an intense and often uncontrollable longing for a beloved who is a source of all that is good, virtuous, and beautiful. It may, but need not, include the desire for sexual contact. Companionate marriage idealizes an emotionally close and egalitarian bond between spouses. Social psychologist Pamela Regan (1998, 99), working in the United States, argues that the experience of romantic love inevitably involves sexual desire—not sexual activity or arousal. Following Charles Lindholm (1998), however, I argue that the relationship between romantic love and sexual desire is historically and culturally contingent and must be investigated. South Asia yields a range of examples, including nonsexual romantic love in brother-sister relationships, conjugal sexual desire in popular folk culture, and romanticized sexuality in middle-class expectations of marriage. The comparison between arranged and love marriage will look quite different depending on whether by “romantic love” one means sexual desire, romantic idealization, or a fusion of the two in the context of monogamous relationships.

Transnational linkages

In South Asia, the English phrase “love marriage” is often opposed to arranged marriage, and one might accept this uncritically as a description of actual practice. A growing body of ethnographic literature aims to dismantle oppositions of arranged and love marriage as simplistic and inaccurate by highlighting social change, transnationalism, and/or diaspora. Regional and class variation in India, and historical change, make it difficult to generalize about marriage (Pasupathi 2002). Susan C. Seymour (1999) documents changes in family structure and child-rearing practices in a thirty-year longitudinal study in Bhubaneswar, India. While both small-town and urban youth featured in her study continue to have arranged marriages, they also describe what one boy calls “an arranged marriage in form only” (Seymour 1999, 212), in which a child suggests

a potential mate for parents' approval or parents take the initiative and then seek the child's approval. They view such arrangements as different from a Western-style love marriage, which is preceded by dating and physical intimacy. Most young women, Seymour notes, accept marriage as inevitable and desirable, and, with no system of dating, they expect parents to help them find a spouse. Yet compared to their grandmothers, who married at much younger ages, these young women have maturity and a greater sense of choice and are thus less fearful of marriage (Seymour 1999, 212–14).

Transnational discourses are central to urban, middle-class women's expectations of love, sex, and marriage. Middle-class women's narratives about marriage are grounded in a transnational framework of companionate, egalitarian marriage based on mutual respect and emotional intimacy, and these expectations are compatible with arranged marriage (Puri 1999, 136). The women Jyoti Puri interviewed for her study of middle-class women in India describe the meaning of marriage in ways that are neither traditional nor Western. "Westernization," argues Puri, does not explain how ideals of companionate marriage may help women resist subordination within a joint family nor is the language of understanding husbands traditional in any sense (1999, 53). These women's narratives describe arranged meetings with prospective grooms in romanticized terms. Similarly, women considering love marriages emphasize the practical considerations usually associated with arranged marriage and state explicitly that they expect to marry someone of the same or higher class (Puri 1999, 140–41). These middle-class urban women draw on transnational discourses of romantic love and companionate marriage while also articulating pragmatic concerns regarding marital choice.

Marriage practices are central to diaspora research. Research on South Asians in Britain links arranged marriage practices to an assumed culture clash between parents and children and a clash between British and Asian cultural patterns (Raj 2003, 106). Dhooleka S. Raj explores the complex process of arranging a marriage, which must be flexible enough to balance parental concerns with those of children, including the possibility that children may introduce their own romantically motivated choices into the process. Moreover, she shows how children employ various strategies of subversion and resistance to get their way, even while agreeing in principle to arranged marriages (Raj 2003, 129).

The mainstream U.S. press highlights arranged marriage with remarkable frequency. It articulates an American fascination that arranged marriage still occurs even among educated, elite (so-called modern) Indians in India and the United States. As cosmopolitan elites, wouldn't they

surely adopt modern courtship practices? The transnational character of the Indian middle classes and their marriage patterns have been well documented.⁴ Sikhs look to the global Sikh diaspora for suitable matches, just as Indo-Trinidadians look for other Indo-Trinidadians in the United States or Canada, and Gujaratis in Fiji look for suitable Gujaratis in Australia. Middle-class Indians around the globe share many experiences, practices, values, and tastes (Lessinger 1995, 43). Attending to social change and historical connections between geographical spaces undermines the production of absolute difference by highlighting similarities between (mostly middle-class) Indian marriage practices in India and its diasporas, although one must also consider religion and other specificities of particular communities.

Recent globalization has created a burgeoning population of middle-class consumers in South Asia who not only have income to spend but have cultivated the longing for romanticized sexuality through mass culture. For example, romance novels were first brought to India in the early 1900s by British wives and teachers, and the genre continues to be read by middle- and upper-class urban Indian women as an instructional source on romance and sexuality; they claim that romance novels will help them obtain the happy marriages that their parents want for them (Parameswaran 2002). Romantic Hollywood films are popular in urban communities. The children of English-speaking classes are now as familiar as U.S. children with animated romantic narratives in which not only princes and princesses but even dalmatians and green ogres fall in love and live happily ever after in heteronormative domesticity. In the romantic narratives of Hindi film, a genre that crosses South Asian class boundaries, the romantic couple is inevitably placed within the parental unit, rather than in isolation from or in opposition to the family. Patricia Uberoi observes that it is the idealized family system that increasingly defines being Indian and, in the blockbuster Bollywood films she examines, this institution is increasingly presented as portable (1998, 308). Parental consent is an important piece of the new marriage ideals. The moral conflict between romantic desire and social expectations is appealingly resolved in these movies by “arranged love marriage,” in which romantic entanglements are eventually endorsed by parents or, alternatively, a couple falls in love after being matched by parents (Uberoi 1998, 306). Mass media has created a world in which more people consider a wider range of possible lives (Appadurai

⁴ The transnationalism of late twentieth-century migrants is not entirely new, since earlier waves of migrants also sustained emotional, social, and financial connections to their places of origin (see Kelly 1991; Foner 1997; Vertovec 2000).

1991), including the expectation of a life elevated by the experience of romantic love.

A cross-border feminist approach to arranged marriage must acknowledge changes in political economy and increased opportunities for young men and women to meet outside of family in South Asia. As wage labor makes young people less dependent on parents, as class identities are increasingly salient and defined by consumption, and as heterosocial spaces of school and work create more opportunities for young people to interact away from home, a system of dating may or may not emerge. Elite identities are linked to transnational modes of consumption, which include romanticized commodities like roses, restaurants, and tourism. Widespread shifts in marriage have occurred as a consequence of changes in consumption, work, and education in India; we may note historical parallels with the United States without presuming a homogenizing effect. It is necessary to explore both the impact of colonialism and more recent change, as well as U.S. discourses of love constituted by an exaggerated distance from the arranged.⁵ Doing so, however, is insufficient.

Past and contemporary diversities within South Asia

Puri correctly observes that whatever deviates from stereotypes of arranged marriage is attributed to Westernization and modernization (Puri 1999, 136). I extend Puri's insight to explicitly critique the presumed primacy and distinctiveness of Western culture in discussions of arranged marriage, for the assumption that all modern ideas, objects, and practices originate in the West reinforces ahistorical notions of tradition. Discussions that focus on romantic discourses and practices resulting from colonialism or recent globalization cannot account for the diversity of South Asian configurations of love, sex, and marriage. Not acknowledging this diversity plays into notions of Western exceptionalism because, disavowals aside, globalized cultural and social forms are expected to flow more from West to East than the reverse. Thus, establishing the presence of transnational discourses of romantic love in South Asia may leave intact assumptions

⁵ Such an approach would, for example, historicize the shift toward a companionate marriage ideal for Indian middle classes that can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. The "New Woman" of late nineteenth-century Indian nationalism, as documented by Partha Chatterjee (1989), was a figure who was taking on a new role of educated, companionate wife. Similarly, Inderpal Grewal identifies the introduction of companionate marriage to bourgeois middle classes as one of the changes under colonial rule that continued the oppression of women; the alternative heterosexuality of Indian family structure was replaced with the homophobic heterosexual norms of the British (1996, 53).

that romantic love was invented by Western modernity and then exported elsewhere (even if transformed in the process). The method proposed here addresses notions that romantic love, like all things modern, is a Western invention.

Dismantling the “package picture” (Narayan 2000) of romantic love as heterosexual, and as a prelude to sex and ideally marriage, reveals evidence of diverse South Asian romantic and sexual cultures. The ancient period offers a range of romantic and sexual discourses, practices, and subcultures in South Asia. The Sanskrit text *Kamasutra*, probably composed around the third century CE, envisions a world of total sexual freedom (for elite men) and offers techniques for the pursuit of erotic pleasure (for men and women) rather than romantic love; in fact, Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar suggest that the text “does not touch the heart” of modern readers drawn to the personal and the subjective (2002, xliv). If the *Kamasutra* celebrates erotic pleasure devoid of romantic sentiment, early classical Tamil poetry celebrates love that is both erotic and romantic and that depicts both male and female subjectivities. Sangam-era Tamil poetry was written during the first three centuries CE but probably existed much earlier in oral form. As George L. Hart III (1979) explains, the category of interior poems (*akam*) concerns the love between man and woman (also see Trawick 1990, 25–27). *Akam* poetry addresses topics associated with particular moods and developmental stages in the love between man and woman. These include the secret meeting of lovers, a man’s journey to elope with his beloved (whose parents will not permit her to marry), and a man who abandons his wife to live with courtesans—and the wife’s resentment (Hart 1979, 3–6). Clearly, both erotic pleasure and romantic sentiment were glorified in certain ancient contexts and were independent of marriage. In addition, mainstream Hindu cosmology charts the romantic and erotic escapades of gods and goddesses.⁶

Ideological elaboration of erotic and romantic experiences varies in different historical periods. The Mughal empire lasted from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries and, at its height, controlled most of the Indian subcontinent and parts of what is today Afghanistan. New sexual cultures emerged in the Indo-Persian culture of the Mughal rulers. For example, elites cultivated artistic traditions that were tied to romantic and sexual interests and defined in opposition to marriage. Female courtesans attached to royal courts were respected as preservers and performers of

⁶ See Ilaiah (2003) for a Dalit critique of sexualized Hindu cosmology in the face of social taboos. See Antarjanam (1998) for a fictionalized account of a young Brahmin widow’s erotic fantasies fueled by worship and recitation of scripture.

elite culture and were in the highest tax brackets until British rule ended the system of royal patronage (Oldenburg 1990). These women treated men as equals or inferiors, were trained in the art of pretense to coax money out of men, and had their most important emotional (and perhaps physical) relationships with other women (Oldenburg 1990, 270–76). In this subculture, which crossed Hindu-Muslim boundaries, romanticized sexuality was highly valued and artistically elaborated but institutionalized as separate from marriage.⁷ Men became infatuated with courtesans but could not marry them. The Urdu novel *Umrao Jan Ada* by Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa ([1905] 1998) is believed to be based on the life story of a courtesan that was narrated to the author. Protagonist Umrao Jan claims that “in the warped world of courtesans, there is no such thing as love. No man in his senses will fall in love with a courtesan because he knows that a courtesan can belong to no one” (Ruswa [1905] 1998, 145). Yet she also criticizes the foolish men who brought ruin upon their families by falling for a particular courtesan and equally foolish courtesans who fell in love with a particular man. Thus, some aristocratic men were driven to give up their wealth, or even to suicide, by their love for a woman whom they could not marry. As in the courtly society of Louis XIV (see Lindholm 1998, 252), men of nobility in Mughal India lost their hearts to courtesans who could never become wives. The fact that courtesan culture was complementary to marriage and reinforced the whore/wife dichotomy does not diminish the fact that it cultivated a romanticized sexuality enhanced by its secrecy.

Ethnographic research shows that romantic love has also sometimes been cultivated in everyday contemporary practices of arranged marriage. Victor C. de Munck (1998) argues that romantic love is one among several factors considered in the arranging of marriages in the Muslim village of Kutali in Sri Lanka. De Munck does not attribute similarities between Kutali and Euro-American marriage to Westernization or globalization. On the contrary, he emphasizes that Kutali is geographically isolated, unaffected by industrialization, dependent on subsistence farming, and considered to be backward. As a Muslim village in a mostly Hindu and Buddhist nation, it is also ethnically isolated. Because of this isolation,

⁷ In many historical and contemporary contexts, marriage and romance are considered mutually exclusive. For example, in imperial Rome marriages were arranged and contractual, while elite men fell deeply and hopelessly in love with slave women or boys (Lindholm 1998, 253). Charles Lindholm also demonstrates the incompatibility between marriage and romance for the Marri Baluch of Iran. For these men, marriage is never for love, and true love must be secretive and with a married woman of a distant camp (250).

there is a much higher rate of actual cross-cousin marriage (marriage between children of a brother and children of a sister) than in other parts of South Asia that share this preference (de Munck 1998, 288). Dowry is the primary way to obtain land, which provides one of the only sources of livelihood. Since young people have few alternative means to support themselves, parents are able to control marriage through dowry. Yet sexual desire can be accommodated within this system (1998, 289). De Munck demonstrates how socialization practices and cultural institutions predispose adolescents to fall in love with someone who is a suitable match. Thus, he argues, traditional kinship or economic structures may encourage romantic sentiment in relationships that are also defined by social or economic advantage.

Kutali villagers themselves view love marriage as a Western corruption, and even use the English word "love" to refer to these marriages (de Munck 1998, 291). Ethnographers investigating binary discourses of love and arranged marriage within particular communities have often confused such descriptions with actual social behavior, a point Hart (2007) also makes with regard to Turkey. Like sexual behavior, much romantic behavior occurs in privacy or secrecy, so knowledge about it is heavily mediated by discourse. However, careful ethnographers take natives' own assertions that love marriage is a Western corruption as a construction of difference that requires investigation rather than as a transparent description of marriage practices. Kutali villagers also acknowledge that love is a necessary precondition for arranging a marriage, and for them sexual desire is a core attribute of romantic love (de Munck 1998, 291). Socialization practices and ritual events predispose adolescents to fall in love with someone they are ideally suited to marry (294). De Munck stresses the similarities with the West, where institutions and socialization practices determine who one will fall in love with, and suggests that Americans are silent about pragmatic reasons while Kutali villagers are silent about romantic motives for marriage. De Munck's analysis is explicitly comparative (United States and Sri Lanka), not transnational, but useful nonetheless to the transnational feminist project of undoing discourses of pure difference.

South Asian women's popular culture celebrates sexuality (both conjugal and extramarital) without idealized romance. Sumanta Banerjee (1990) shows that in the late nineteenth century, elite Bengali nationalist men, influenced by the culture of their English mentors and with the goal of emancipating Bengali women, suppressed indigenous forms of women's popular culture shared by women of various classes, including songs, poems, dances, and theatrical performances. The songs were humorous, sensuous, and ribald, and expressed women's discontent in a male-dom-

inated society. They were criticized as vulgar and, by the turn of the century, women folk performers no longer existed in Calcutta (Banerjee 1990, 130–32). Ann Grodzins Gold (1994) offers contemporary examples of women's songs from Rajasthan that depict a graphic and playful sexuality. Sung in the female ritual contexts of weddings and births, women's songs celebrate pregnancy and birth as erotic and thereby subvert elite Hindu ideology that opposes the good fertility of a mother to the dangerous sexuality of a wife. A Hindu wife is supposed to subordinate her desire for intimacy with her husband to his preexisting loyalties to, and affections for, his natal kin. However, in these songs, women sometimes abuse their husbands and praise their lovers; at other times, they sing about intimacy and sexual pleasure with their husbands and depict the conjugal couple as coconspirators against prying kin. Gold writes about folk songs without presenting them as exemplary of a static tradition, but her framework is not transnational.

Delinking romance and sexuality may even allow us to consider South Asian brother-sister relationships as part of a romantic landscape. Sisters are imbued with magical powers, and the social and affective bond between brothers and sisters is primordial and often prioritized over that between spouses, particularly in Tamil ritual, myth, and literature (Peterson 1988). Margaret Trawick (1990) explores the link between social structure and sentiment in a South Indian patrilineal family with a preference for cross-cousin marriage. She critiques the structuralist proposition that cross-cousin marriage is primarily a continuation across generations of alliances between groups. The intimate and mutually supportive bond found between brothers and sisters throughout South Asia, she argues, is affirmed when their children marry (1990, 53, 172). The bond of deep longing between brothers and sisters is idealized and desexualized. Brothers and sisters can never share a life, despite their deep love for each other, while husbands and wives must share a life, regardless of their compatibility (182–83). Unpacking U.S. notions of romanticized sexuality enables us to ask the question: does it make sense to speak of brother-sister love, or even the idealized love between mothers and sons, as romantic? Its sentimental aspects suggest parallels with romantic friendships between women in Victorian America.

Contemporary U.S. discourses of companionate marriage, romantic idealization, and sexual desire are disseminated and transformed through economic and cultural globalization, but some configurations of these sentiments have existed prior to, or distinct from, Western modernity. I have offered only a few examples here to illustrate the diversity of South Asian sexual discourses and practices. Even if contemporary modes of

expressing romanticized sexuality are linked to colonialism and more recent globalization, the sentiments of sexual desire and romantic love are not new to South Asia—a point that Laura Ahearn has made about Nepal (2003, 2004), Yunxiang Yan about China (2003), and Hart about Turkey (2007).

Transnational linkages and internal diversities

The pure category of romantic love is generally imagined in contemporary U.S. culture as a free, spontaneous, irrational, and overwhelming desire that leads to sexual involvement and ideally marriage. This particular construction is deeply embedded in historical changes in procreation, marriage, family, state, and economy in the United States. The implied recipe for marital success is historically and culturally contingent: freely chosen partners, deep love between spouses, priority of marital bond over other competing ties, sharing of deep feelings, expressive affection, and sexual fidelity (Coontz 2005, 20). To observe that this configuration of love marriage is embedded in nation is not to say that it has no parallels elsewhere. These parallels may result from cross-border processes of European colonialism or more recent globalization, but they are not always explicable in these terms. Those transnational feminist analyses of arranged marriage that focus on social formations recognizable as modern ought not leave intact the notion that romantic love itself is new to South Asia.

Ethnographic and historical research shows that in both the United States and South Asia romantic love has taken different forms in different contexts: it has served as a prelude to marriage or as a transcendent emotion to be cultivated outside the pragmatic institution of marriage; it has been desexualized in some contexts and sexualized in others; it has been expressed through material gifts or poetic verse. Sexual desire, romance, heterosexuality, and companionate marriage need not exist everywhere as a neat package, as U.S. discourse suggests they should. Brother-sister love may be romanticized but not sexual, just as conjugal pleasure may be exuberantly celebrated without romantic idealization.

Although the notion of boundaries has become emblematic of essentialized forms of cultural difference, it is possible to discuss translocal complexities while also maintaining a notion of cultural boundaries, which are in fact being constantly asserted by those we study (Bashkow 2004, 444). Rather than discovering cultural differences in the world, we must turn our attention to their historical production and ethnographic reproduction (Bunzl 2004, 440). Both South Asians and U.S. citizens may assert an opposition between love and arranged marriages, with different

implications, and in neither case does this opposition capture existing contingencies or complex relationships between global and local. Cross-border feminism must assume that cultural boundaries are permeable while also interrogating discursive constructions of difference—not replicating them in scholarship. South Asian and U.S. marriages are not identical, but the difference is not that one is about social reproduction and the other is not.

For scholars attempting to reframe cultural practices that are flashpoints of feminist thinking, I suggest a cross-border feminist method that begins with the typically unresearched vantage point and then looks for both transnational linkages and diversities within states or cultural regions; this strategy may offer insights about similarities in ideology or practice as well as historical linkages and is thus capable of fully dismantling discourses of difference. We cannot examine tradition and ignore recent change. Neither can we focus on recent change and erase precolonial social forms. Transnational feminism at its best accomplishes this, but feminist scholars must more clearly articulate and address the distinct, even competing, agendas of our project.

A notion of compatibility is useful to highlight similarities between arranged and love marriage without relying on an idealized U.S. notion of romance, an assumption of isolated, homogenous, and historically disconnected cultures, or the uniqueness of U.S. romantic love that is spread via globalization. Both U.S. citizens and South Asians discuss marriage in terms of compatibility. As per the stereotype, Indians tend to use sociological language (family status, education, community, and the like), while U.S. citizens employ individualized language (personality, interests, physical attraction). But these discourses are not unmediated descriptions of difference in practice. Class status and education are key features of compatibility in both contexts. Moreover, just as family and social networks are mobilized to find suitable matches in South Asia and its diasporas, so mediating institutions and (sociologically constructed) romantic attraction help to ensure that U.S. citizens meet and desire compatible partners.

In both places some are attracted to incompatible persons; if the desired person is inappropriate (wrong gender, class, race, or caste), women and men are unlikely to organize their lives around that attraction.⁸ As discussed, some noblemen in Mughal India lost their fortunes by falling in love with courtesans and refusing to marry. Some children in India today elope in the face of parental opposition. But most will accede to, or

⁸ I thank Ellen Lewin for this insight.

negotiate with, parental wishes. In a study of runaway marriages in rural North India, Prem Chowdhry notes that the British colonial judiciary recognized the right of a male guardian to arrange a daughter's marriage but that the 1955 Hindu Marriage Act of independent India imposed hardly any restriction on marriage between two adult Hindus (Chowdhry 2004, 55, 65). Nevertheless, in all the cases of runaway marriage analyzed by Chowdhry, the woman was pressured by relatives to deny marriage and accuse the man of abduction and rape; however, not all women succumb to this pressure. My point is that romantic love is no more transgressive in the United States than in South Asia. A comparison of marriage practices must address the way love facilitates social reproduction as well as the felt desires of arranged marriage.

Those strands of cross-border feminism that either examine cultural difference from a comparative and relativistic perspective or rely on narrow definitions of romanticized sexuality, explaining its presence elsewhere strictly in terms of transnational discourses or practice, are insufficient to the task of undoing discourses of exaggerated difference. I argue for a cross-border feminist method that traces the construction of U.S. culture as exceptional and avoids essentializing postcolonial cultures, on the one hand, and misrecognizing romantic love as a recent import, on the other. This goal requires investigation of both transnational linkages and historical, regional, and contextual diversities within what is called tradition.

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