

Rapport CAPES 2007 – Dossier ELE 21 – Child Marriages in India: an unchanging tradition

The three documents in this dossier are set in India and revolve around the age-old custom of child marriages, still prevalent at the end of the 20th century in the country. The child becomes the object of its parents' will and desire, enabling them to succeed in their role as dutiful parents who have fulfilled their obligations to society by marrying off their offspring. [Gandhi: (1869-1948): Indian lawyer and politician, qualified as barrister in London, led the fight for independence. Candidates could look up the appropriate reference on Gandhi in the French dictionary of proper nouns. The initials M.K. stand for Mohandas Karamchand. This was not to be confused with the title "Mahatma" which means "great soul. M.K. + Porbandar, written Purbander & Kathiawad.]

Presentation of Documents:

Document A: M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography OR The story of my experiments with truth*, 1927. Autobiography/Story/Narrative: Gandhi's personal account of his own wedding at the age of thirteen. The writer, as an adult, views this immutable tradition which deprives the children of choice and makes them the voiceless victims of this social system. Gandhi, renowned for developing his ideas of non-violent protest, also championed the cause of justice, including over the issue of child marriages. Gandhi's efforts to fight the system resulted in the British Child Marriage Prevention Act of 1929, and in 1978, the Child Marriage Restraint Act fixed the legal age at 18 for women and 21 for men.

The reader is struck by the confusion between author and narrator which is explicit in the title itself, *The Story of my experiments with truth*. The writer/narrator's subjectivity is obvious on line 56 where the word "story" is repeated ("in writing this story"). Although it would have never occurred to Gandhi to question the decisions made by his elders, when he narrates the episode in his autobiography, at the age of forty, the reader notices how his views are coloured by time, awareness of violence and injustice: "little did I dream then...as a child" (l. 77-79). Yet the frontiers between the past and present are blurred. Gandhi condemns the traditional benefit of child marriages which are cheaper: "lesser expense and greater *éclat*" (l. 42). There was "no thought of our welfare, much less of our wishes" (l. 27-28).

The reader empathises with those whose voices are unheard, as the act is simply "an agreement between the parents, and the children [are] often not even informed of it" (l. 15-16). It is only in the preparatory stages that "we got warning". The use of the noun "warning" gives an ominous tone. The child's view is seen from a totally different perspective, as getting married merely meant "the prospect of good clothes to wear, drumbeating, marriage processions, rich dinners and a strange girl to play with" (l. 52). This contrasts starkly with his vision as an adult who is acutely aware of, and hurt by, this kind of violence committed against children, for he "can see no moral argument in support of such a preposterously early marriage" (l. 8-9).

Document B: Swapan Parekh, *Kamal arriving with the baraat* (wedding procession from the bridegroom's village), 1990.

A black and white photograph of a seven-year-old boy arriving at his bride-to-be's village, somewhere in rural India, to be married to a girl of the same age whom he has never seen before. The setting is not suited to a festive occasion. The young bridegroom looks more like a lamb to the slaughter: the scowl on his face and his posture. The villagers, huddled in groups, don't look happy either in this atmosphere of general indifference. Paradoxically, Kamal, the bridegroom, is not the centre of the villagers' attention, and his gaze is directed at the camera lens, disconnected and unaware of the others. Two distinct groups are formed at a distance from Kamal on the horse: a group of children in the background and the men in the foreground who have their backs turned to the bridegroom. Their attention seems to be on something else and Kamal looks totally isolated, perched up on his horse. His father (presumably) is looking at him and the little girl in the foreground on the right, is staring straight at Kamal. Does she see a mirror image? The word "procession" in the caption is ironic as there is nobody in this wedding procession from the bridegroom's village. It is difficult to imagine such an event taking place given the date when the photograph was taken.

Document C: Nayantara Sahgal, *Rich Like Us*, 1985.

[The novel *Rich Like Us* by Indian writer Nayantara Sahgal presents a picture of postindependence India. The publication of the novel caused uproar as it violently condemned Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's rule under Emergency. First cousin to Indira Gandhi, the writer of nine novels and eight works of non-fiction, Sahgal was born in 1927 into one of India's most prominent political families. Politics and history have inspired her feminist writings. Her female characters are mostly victims of conventional Indian society engaged in their quest for identity.]

In this extract, the adult narrator, Sonali, recounts her aversion to marriage, which stems from her childhood memories of weddings, and particularly that of a school friend not much older than the narrator herself. The adverb "never" on line 1 clearly brings out her rebellion to this custom, and the repetition of the adverb in the next sentence reinforces the unpleasantness of what is paradoxically known as the happiest day of a woman's life. The child witnessing the event is horrified by a certain form of violence and cruelty committed by adults. Line 53 gives the impression of the bride being captured like an animal. The narrator feels helpless as she cannot do anything to save her friend from such a fate (l. 53-54). Her defiance of the system is intensified when she looks back.

Echoes of this extract can be found in Documents A and B. The bride's entrapment can be seen through the domination of adults. The child becomes the object of its parents' will and authority. However, the child can only come to terms with it as an adult who is free to fight the system with hindsight in the way Gandhi does in Document A or Sonali does by avoiding the trap; it is only the young bridegroom in Document B who is left with no choice.

Angles of Study: thematic link, binary oppositions

1) Constraints/Pressures

• Social

Issues of caste and class. "Marriage among Hindus is no simple matter...each tries to outdo the other" (Document A). Or, in Document C (line 27): "Punjabis have no taste", according to the narrator's mother who, as a Kashmiri, considers herself far superior to the uncouth *nouveaux riches* Punjabis.

• Economic

Affluence/Poverty in all three documents. Parents "will bring themselves to ruin" over "clothes and ornaments, variety of courses, marriage processions, and rich dinners" (Doc A). " 'They *will* overdo things', my mother complained as we drove through the gates into the overdone rainbow lighting of the garden." The reader senses the mother's disdain for the unrefined setting. Gandhi's journey to his bride's town is done by ox cart, whereas Kamal's family has probably walked all the way to reach the bride's village in Doc B. Regardless of the means of transport, everything moves "at suffocating slowness" as if to prolong the narrator's agony in Doc C, as she is stuck in the car behind the motorcade of the bridegroom's party.

• Parental

Dominating adult / submissive child: in Doc C, Bimmie, the bride, is the focus of the adult's gaze. She has the status of a prize animal with the nose ring and other pieces of heavy jewellery. She is hidden under and weighed down by layers of gold and "great whacking stones". The description of her submissive attitude contrasts with the pleasure of the few women who stay behind until it is time to take the bride out of the room. In the photograph, Kamal is led by his father in what is ironically termed as a "procession" in the caption. Gandhi and his brother are escorted to Porbandar from Rajkot. The children in all three documents comply with what the elders have decided. Yet only Gandhi seems to delight in the "childish amusement of the wedding".

2) Identity

• Being vs Appearing

In Documents A and C, the elders want to have outrageously ostentatious weddings for their own pleasure, and the "last best time of their lives", as Gandhi notes in Doc A, seems to strike a jarring note, implying that their lives end once their duty is done; the notion of festivities is subverted as the elders also view the ceremonies as a chore. The neighbours will also have to tolerate the noise, filth and general disruption as every parent has to do his duty.

• Identity vs Anonymity

The bride in Doc C and the groom in B are both named, whereas paradoxically those in the forefront – fathers, uncles, women, busybodies – remain unnamed. Childhood is nipped in the bud; the child-victim is reified, and this results in the loss of childhood, innocence and identity once *it* is married off and now belongs to its new family. Even the child's body is no longer his own: it is stripped of all intimacy, decorated, painted, and "smeared with turmeric paste", the face is covered with sandalwood dots; and only the elders are permitted to tilt the bride's head, fiddle with her bangles, stroke her cheeks (Document C). Whether they are imprisoned in a "tent" in Doc C, or in the bulky clothes in Doc B, these children cannot escape their fate, not any more than Gandhi can in Doc A. Marriage is a sentence for life.

• Patriarchy/Matriarchy

The omnipresence of patriarchal figures in Documents A and B and the reversal of gender roles in Document C are clearly defined. Document C is dominated by women who keep Bimmie confined in a special room until she can be brought out on display. The narrator is not permitted to forget her roots and her identity both conveyed through her mother's culture which is "the more powerful" (l. 70).

3) Stylistic and rhetorical devices

• Narrative voice: His Story/History

• Autobiography/Confession

A different narrative technique which is tinged with subjectivity. Gandhi's search for truth is an "experiment". Reality is tinged by fantasy and imagination in what the narrator calls a "narrative" or a "story". "Much as I wish that I had not to write this chapter, it is my painful duty to have to record the truth" which causes a sense of guilt: "I shall have to swallow many bitter draughts in the course of this narrative. And I cannot do otherwise."

• Remembrance of things past

The selective role of memory results in a deliberate omission of certain details: "I propose to draw a curtain over my shame" (l. 53) reveals his inhibition at the taboos of sexuality which he calls "carnal desire", and even as an adult, "the recollection of those things is fresh in my memory". In Document C, the narrator uses verbs like "riveted", or she "was hypnotized" to arouse the reader's empathy. "I'll never forget Bimmie's [wedding]." In line 5, "that September night" is a narrative strategy meant to gain the reader's sympathy. The adult narrator is aware that, even as a child, she cannot be excused for her signs of rebellion when she reflects on her behaviour: "the frightful noise I was making" or "I harried my mother". Her protest is of no avail as she is reassured by one of the busybodies that she too will be in her friend's position when the time comes. The incommunicability between the child and the adult only affects the narrator in Document C. Similarly, Gandhi condemns the injustice towards children who are forced into marriage, and is "inclined to pity [himself]", although as a child, his father's actions were "beyond reproach", and the experience seemed "right and proper and pleasing".

4) All the World's a Stage

- *Light*

In the narrator's memory, the "trees stepped into the spotlight and retreated into darkness", or "percussion instruments [that] shone in the theatrical daylight of acetylene flares", the "red and green stones flashing at her throat", the "hot bright fluorescence" remain just as vivid when she looks back in Document C.

- *Sound*

In Document A, "women, whether they have a voice or no, sing themselves hoarse", "disturb the peace of their neighbours" and generally cause "turmoil and bustle". But it is in Document C that the reader becomes aware of the cacophony that results from "What a racket!" or the "trumpet [that] brayed", the "discord of cymbals erupting like claps of thunder", or the "tuneless dissonance", and "[the] volleys of errant notes that broke loose, splintered the air, colliding and crashing, making a noise so deafening". The frightful noise of the "trumpet blast" overpowered her "wailing protest". The rhythm is broken and slows down when the "car got wedged", "moving with suffocating slowness, halting every few minutes". From "monotonous spasms", the rhythm gradually builds up and the "wails welled up" to a frenzied pitch when "everyone tumbled out excitedly". The rhythm builds up to a climax in Document A when the narrator mentions how "months *are* taken up over" the preparation, and once it is over, the past tense is used by Gandhi when he recounts the "months [which] *were* taken up in preparation" and ends in the anti-climax of dirt and filth following the "turmoil and bustle". On the contrary, everything seems to have come to a standstill in Document B: the ceremony in the photograph is held in silence and gloom, despite the daylight, as opposed to the artificial "theatrical daylight" in Document C.

- *Alliteration*

In Document C, the narrator's car "wedged in the winding" motorcade moved with "suffocating slowness" and the deafening notes of the tuneless band were "colliding and crashing in a confusion" as "wails welled up in [her]".

Mise en scène

In Document C, the setting is suited for the theatrical metaphors which contrast darkness and lighting. The trees step into the spotlight and retreat into darkness as the narrator goes past the *tableau* in the family car. She is so close to the brightly lit stage where the band performs that she can almost touch one of the musicians. Meanwhile, backstage, Bimmie must be placed, moved around and fiddled with by "the director and her crew" of busybodies in the dressing room where she demurely waits for her cue – a trumpet blast – so that she can be brought out to face the audience. She, like her predecessors, will give her unique performance from "the preliminaries to the final drama", according to Gandhi's expression in Document A (1.58-59). The wedding attended by Sonali in Document C is a gaudy, garish, urban affair with all the trimmings, carefully planned to meet the audience's expectations, but the protagonist/star is but an extra.

In Document B, the audience is indifferent to Kamal's unique performance in this unsophisticated setting despite his dramatic entry, front stage. In Document A, Gandhi delights in performing, even though each detail has been carefully planned for him to follow the instructions.

"**Remembrance of things past**" would seem an appropriate title for Documents A and C. The power of memory is an important reminder of how the past remains unchanged in the vastness of India. The documents reinforce the cruelty behind the idea of evolution and progress as the privileges of the chosen few. Violence and disrespect in the name of religion and ancestral rites become tacitly adopted laws. Thus the title of the book in Document B, *A Celebration of Independence* is heavily tinged with irony with regard to the subject of the dossier.

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