Love and marriage, globally

LOVE AND MARRIAGE, GLOBALLY

HENRIKE DONNER

Invitations to love: literacy, love letters, and social change in Nepal
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Modern loves: the anthropology of romantic courtship and companionate marriage **Edited by Jennifer S. Hirsch and Holly Wardlow**

One of the expectations of modernity is that the world should "become smaller", which is really just another way of saying that it should become more homogenous. This homogeneity, it is suggested, extends to social relationships, including the most intimate ones. Thus, family and kinship are increasingly defined, everywhere, in terms of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family, in spite of these being recent phenomena in much of the world. Giddens's writings, which are among the more enlightened on the subject, sketch out an influential modernist narrative in which love matches and smaller households – built on a culture of individualism, an ideology of choice, and a stress on what has been termed "coupledom" – have spread around the world. The global proliferation of such things as Valentine's day celebrations and elaborate honeymoons, as well as the emergence of normative legal discourses concerning acceptable matches between persons, including those of the same sex, seems to back up this narrative.

It is assumed that urbanisation and industrialisation promote economic and social independence from collectives (such as extended kin groups) and that cultural globalisation, in turn, promotes ideas about modern personhood based on individualistic values and the free choice of friends and partners rather than the imposed relationships of the pre-globalisation era. As Giddens suggests, these new kinds of relationships have become a key source of meaning for individuals everywhere.[1]

This narrative broadly opposes emotional intimacy, located within modern marriage, to older, traditional and more collectivist norms and practices governing relationships, and thus the interests of individuals to those of the family and community. Marriages are based less on contract than on emotional/affective ties. Households are sites of consumption rather than production, with "private life" arguably replacing reproduction (i.e. having children) as a key route to self-realisation. Within this context, romantic love is re-evaluated. Because it sits comfortably with the notion of choice, with cultures of individualism, and with identities routed in intersubjective recognition rather than communal negotiation, the idiom of love becomes a crucial signifier of modernity.

Much recent ethnography provides evidence of how the discourse on romantic courtship and companionate marriage, expressed in the idiom of love, has indeed become a prominent marker of the modern around the world. Increasingly, modernity is linked to intimate practices of various kinds, including pre-marital courtship, self-arranged marriages and monogamous unions. Affective ties have become the basis for a conjugality that is interpreted, by many ordinary people, as more egalitarian and modern than what came before.

The power of this discourse is evident in a wide range of places, of which Laura Ahearn's monograph *Invitations to Love* showcases one. She focuses on social change as experienced by the residents of Junigau village in Nepal through the lens of new patterns of courtship and novel expectations towards marital relations. In this region it has only recently become common for youngsters to go through extended periods of courtship. Interestingly, this is conducted mostly by letter, and the relationships so formed often lead to elopement and clandestine marriage. By engaging in such relationships the younger generation bring into question the convention of arranged marriages and in conversations with the anthropologist they certainly state a *preference* for choosing their own partners, whether they actually defy parental guidance or not. Ahearn's monograph contextualises their ideas about romantic courtship and situates the new practice of letter-writing within an analysis of literacy as a signifier of development.

The ethnographic evidence she provides suggests that the idiom of romantic love and the expectation of courtship conducted through the medium of love letters indexes more than youthful rebellion. As Ahearn found herself talking to more and more youngsters in the village about love, it emerged that the importance afforded to the genre of love letters was related to the coding of literacy as 'modern', and the transformative nature attributed to writing and courtship itself. During her fieldwork she accessed, copied and translated about 200 of these letters, most of them written by young men to young women, and had many opportunities for intensive discussions of this new and exciting technology and the associated phenomena of courtship and elopement with villagers of different age groups. As is the case with letters more generally, it appears that the young lovers value the act of writing as highly as the content, as it has a transformative and liberating effect on those mastering a modern medium and developing a reflexive mode of presentation as they go along. Thus, as Ahearn shows, their romantic involvement reflects wider changes in society at large, and whilst in some cases lasting relationships are

established, letter writing and romantic courtship themselves are sites where ideas about modern lives more generally are tried out and the associated gender roles can be performed.

Here as elsewhere in South Asia, the idea of love that 'strikes' young people is not new; indeed, comparative anthropological studies using a variety of methods suggest that the phenomenon of falling in love may be universal.[2] The love letters, however, do not only document how this (perhaps very common) phenomenon is understood and discussed in Nepali villages, but present a window into the wider experience of social change, as they are at the same time an instrument as well as an effect of 'modern' forms of self-fashioning. In light of these transformations, earlier practices of love and romance, which were not expected to lead to marriage, have been substituted with the notion that love promotes emotional intimacy and this in turn represents the preferable basis for match-making as much as it is a necessary ingredient for successful modern marriages.

In villages like these, stories of earlier marriages by elopement circulate, but are relegated to a backward past, where they were the exception from the norm of arranged marriages. Today, villagers hold letter-writing responsible for what some elders see as an excess of affect in young people, and thus the discourse linking literacy with development and change is easily transferred to include a change in the quality of courtship brought about by a new technology. Furthermore, now that youths can express themselves, and now that elopement supports the realisation of 'true', hidden and authentic selves in the course of romance, love has become synonymous with modernity. Thus, not only are villagers no longer surprised when a couple defy parental wishes and elope to get married, Ahearn suggests that the expectations of more companionate marriage, and an emphasis on the primacy of the conjugal bond within the wider kinship network, make this form of match-making a widely accepted choice.

Among other things, Ahearn relates love as an idiom of modernity to male migration and the concurrent rise in female-headed households. Together with romance, the new found assertiveness of married women highlights the significance of ideas about choice, individualism and conjugal relationships. But whilst there is a possibility that socio-economic change will eventually bring the era of arranged marriages to an end – as young people increasingly deny their relatives significant input into their choice of spouse – it is their presence that gives love its discursive power. In a careful and thoughtful interpretation, Ahearn suggests that whilst letter writing is a 'modern' practice popular among the young, it signifies novel forms of negotiation around gender relations that are reforming institutions like marriage and the family from within.

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The edited volume *Modern Loves: The Anthropology of Romantic Courtship and Companionate Marriage* is another attempt to unravel why and how romantic love is linked to notions of 'modernity'. The contributors draw on material from highly varied field sites and communities: working-class Latino youths in urban California, Huli in Papua New Guinea, élite Igbo-speakers in Nigeria, rural Kalasha youths in Pakistan, Mexican villagers, Brazilian shanty-town dwellers, and Chinese living in Hong Kong and Singapore. In all of the case studies, love and companionate marriage are, again, closely associated with notions of modern selves. As with the Nepalese village youths discussed by Ahearn, young Huli, for example, increasingly defy their relatives' wishes and enter love marriages after periods of romantic courtship. Across the chapters, love acts as an important catalyst for narratives of identity, often in multi-cultural environments and in relation to local institutions including schools and churches. Moreover, love sits comfortably, it seems, with a modern and increasingly neoliberal discourse that emphasises individualistic values, autonomy from collectives, and aspirations for social mobility. However, the volume equally demonstrates that what romance consists in – that is, what it actually

means to be in love and what practices are associated with it – varies significantly depending on ethnic origin, economic circumstances, and gender. Thus, Huli girls, who attend churches in town in search of modern lovers, do not see love as a marker of ethnic identity – by contrast with Kalash youths in Pakistan, who are brought up with a view of self-chosen marriages as a marker of community linked to distinct interpretations of Islam, something which differentiates them from their more conservative neighbours. Here, as in the cases of the Nepali and Huli youths, discourses on love centre around relatively chaste forms of courtship, but as the studies from other field sites show, this is not always the case. For Latino youths in LA or poor women in Recife's favelas, for instance, sex plays a major role in courtship as it is interpreted by women in particular as establishing lasting ties and as a proof of commitment. Sex doesn't always lead to lasting relationships, of course. But as shantytown dwellers in Brazil and young LA residents are reported as saying, love is nothing without sex, and the bonds of (sometimes unintended) parenthood may have the effect of uniting a couple.

Whilst trust and emotional closeness are taken as a sign of 'love' in all the cases in this book, how such things are realised, and which practices – from letter writing, to sex, to economic support – help to establish, nurture and legitimise affective ties differs greatly. Thus, the experience of love and romantic courtship, but also the reality of companionate marriage, is determined among other things by gender relations and the way these are re-constituted in the modern era. It appears that between men and women the room for negotiation and the possibility of autonomy afforded by pre-courtship and companionate marriage are highly unequal, in many cases. The far-reaching consequences of this for women are most obvious in the two chapters that focus on reproductive and sexual health issues. Among élite Nigerian urbanites, the ideal of companionate marriage keeps wives and mistresses from addressing the issue of condom use to protect themselves from infection, because of a shared belief that HIV is only an issue when having sex with a stranger. Since wives and mistresses can hardly be called strangers, promiscuous men having sex with their wives/mistresses cannot be expected to use condoms. A similar moral obligation to trust one's husband, even when proof of other relationships may suggest a risk of infection, pervades the married life of Mexican village women, who are not in a position to ask their returning migrant husbands to use condoms. Gendered moralities, like the honour and shame complex, and the concomitant notion that husbands must control the sexuality of their wives, carry over into the non-traditional, i.e. self-chosen, matches here described.

As several chapters show, poverty may have the effect of increasing economic and psychological dependency between husbands and wives, and this can also exacerbate the pressure on women to engage in risky strategies to 'keep their partners'. Among favela dwellers in Brazil or among the transsexual *hijra* community, ties between spouses are fragile and relationships are characterised by everyday violence. The 'female' role demands demure behaviour and acceptance of 'male' superiority and sexual freedom. Across a range of class backgrounds, gendered codes of behaviour imply that love has very different consequences for men and women – as is illustrated by popular discourses on infidelity (typically acceptable for men but not women). As a result, there is an ideological disjunction in the global ideal of companionate marriages, the modernity of which is linked, in theory, to egalitarian relations between husbands and wives. In reality, the inequality that is inherent in moral discourses surrounding modern love may support, among other things, the spread of a 'husband as provider' model, meanwhile lessening the influence of other kinship ties which may, in the past, have been a source of support, even power, to women.

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The narratives presented in *Modern Loves* tend to follow rigid scripts, and are told partly in order to produce the present as different from the past. Within this framework ideas about personhood are shown to be a major site of transformation. Thus with the spread of formal education and wage labour, romantic love no longer exists as a mere state of affection and longing within largely segregated communities. It has become a major arena to define and to perform modern selves and to link a number of spaces, including the family, schools and churches. The latter are not merely facilitating meetings between young men and women, they are crucially implicated in *knowledge* about these new modern selves as they propagate new values, new patterns of gender relations, and new technologies of the self, often in opposition to older ideas of what made appropriate persons and relationships. However, as much as romantic love and emotional intimacy are productive of persons and draw on a variety of discourses beyond the collective experience of a local community – ranging from soap operas to sermons – it would be short-sighted to assume that the modern units housing those selves necessarily increase autonomy and agency. Indeed, the relationships realised in newly established private spheres may be companionate but they are also productive of new interdependencies and pressures.

For example, it happens that some individuals in an Indian *hijra* (transsexual) community – who survive as sex workers – crave modern and intimate relationships with local 'husbands'. Unlike clients, such husbands are expected to care for and support their spouses in long-term relationships based on mutual affection and clearly defined domestic roles, whilst clients are merely seen as a sources of income and sexual gratification. However, given the precariousness of their livelihoods and general marginalisation, *hijras* pay the price of heartbreak and domestic violence when trying to create and sustain these affective bonds and long-term relationships.

While in the cases of Huli or Kalash youth affective ties are sometimes facilitated by the community for political reasons, the marginalised *hijra* community does not want to give any legitimacy to marriages, so that individuals engaged in such relationships need to construct them even more forcefully as enduring and mutual. Insisting on emotional intimacy as the sole basis for marital unions rationalises the absence of a common future as parents and so love becomes the overdetermined source of all emotional, economic and social stability, often with disastrous consequences. Unlike the case of the Kalash, where romantic involvement is an expression of collectively valued autonomy and individualism in the face of more restrictive ideologies prevalent in neighbouring communities, *hijras* cannot present love as a collective virtue.

In South Asia as elsewhere, for instance in the Papua Huli community or among Chinese in Hong Kong and Singapore, earlier rituals based on the "exchange of women" need to be reformulated as well, as new ideas about marriage entail new ideas about the meaning of affinity and its related values and obligations. If for a Huli woman a 'Christian husband' enables the fashioning of a modern self, in the Chinese case the presents given around the time of a wedding contribute to a similar transformation. In both cases new kinds of networking and symbolic interaction become possible and necessary and whilst modern institutions may evoke traditional values as a way of reasoning about marriage, they are often de facto promoting entirely new kinds of personhood through novel concepts of conjugal relations.

Moralistic discourses on fidelity and chastity figure prominently in most of these settings, and accounts of love and marriage are more often than not highly scripted, as I have already noted. While young men and women tend to present an idealised version of their relationships and of their own adherence to gendered stereotypes, the chapters also testify to the ambiguities and contestations of the new ideologies according to which emotional intimacy, discussed in relation to trust and mutuality, defines a good marriage. Such ambiguities about 'modern love' are illustrated in the chapter on Nigerian married

élite men's love lives, which charts their enjoyment of mistresses (charmingly referred to as handbags) as they, nonetheless, become full persons through co-parenting with their wives. In a very different environment, the favelas of Recife, women are expected to lead sheltered lives, allowing men to control their mobility while often being the main breadwinners. Only a small minority opt for *libertade*, that is sexually active roles in which men are denied control over their mobility, and this everyday resistance does come at the loss of protection in a violence-ridden environment. In these, as in other cases – e.g. among the mistresses of affluent Nigerian men, the teenage girls in LA, the Indian transsexuals, and the Mexican village women – sexual relations are an important economic resource outside marriage in circumstances in which dependence on male breadwinners is problematic in some way. Far from simply enabling agency per se, 'modern' love and marriage change the strategic interpretation of affairs, courtship and marital relations, and the technologies employed to realise these – now more or less obligatory – affective involvements.

It appears from the ethnographies discussed that it is not so much the case that love and romance make an appearance under conditions of globalisation, but that the way these (existing) idioms are interpreted in the context of companionate marriage affects far-reaching transformations. How such conjugal relations, which are increasingly also determining same-sex relationships, will play out in the lives of individuals depends crucially on class and gender, as in most instances economic opportunities open to men and women differ, along with ideals of what companionship may entail. Emotional intimacy is not only a sign of reflexive selves but also a strategy of dependents who are obliged to negotiate idealised versions of marital relations in often difficult circumstances.

As Wardlow and Hirsch suggest in the introduction to *Modern Loves*, the images, technologies and practices associated with 'romantic love' may be persuasive because they feed into ideas and values connecting different social fields. Their book not only shows how the conjunction of discourses on romantic love and on companionate marriage makes for modern selves, but how the content and actual success in realising new subjectivities is fraught with tension. As a number of contributors show, these tensions are only partly to do with social change: they often stem from the inability to actually transform romantic love and courtship into more egalitarian conjugal bonds.

Whilst the more reductionist amongst sociologists, often studying their own societies, would assume self-chosen marriage and new forms of marital conduct go together, or that romantic courtship is automatically related to pre-marital sexual freedoms, such linkages cannot be assumed without attention to exactly how these discourses and practices relate to specific social-historical environments. Once a comparative framework is established, global forms such as 'companionate marriage' appear to mean very different things to different people, in fact. The ethnographic accounts in both of these books suggest that romantic courtship and companionate marriage are not social givens that appear with modernisation, but that they present narratives which situate social actors in relation to modernity through the discourse on what is 'traditional' and what is 'modern'. As Ahearn suggests, contrary to the linear story presented by some scholars writing about intimate loves and social change,[3] the discourse on traditional and modern practices is not a sign of 'modernisation' but a narrative *about* modernity. As if to support her argument, her Nepali interlocutors do not only refer to specific practices, for instance the custom of washing a husband's feet in the morning, as outdated, but argue that the values this practice represents have become superfluous or 'impractical'. What remains to be seen, however, is whether these villagers with their talk about love and progress are travellers on a common road towards 'affective individualism', a state of mind and heart that – sociologists suggest[4] – marks inter-subjective relationships in all modern societies.

1. Anthony Giddens (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies,* Oxford: Polity Press, and (2002) *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives,* London: Profile. ↩
2. William Jankowiak (ed.) (2008) *Intimacies, Sex, and Love Across Cultures*, New York: Columbia University Press. ↩
3. For a fascinating ethnography that argues along these lines, see Yunxiang Yan (2003) *Private Life under Socialism: Love, intimacy, and family change in a Chinese Village 1949–1999*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. ↩
4. The term was coined by sociologists to describe the alleged revolution in family life and marital relations from the 18th century onwards, which was said to accompany processes of industrialisation. More recently the term has been rediscovered to describe 'new' cultures of intimacy based on the idea of the 'pure' relationships; see for instance Lynn Jamieson (1997) *Intimacy: Personal Relations in Modern Societies,* Cambridge: Polity Press. ↩