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Poetic Arrivals and Departures: Bodying the Ethnographic Field in Verse

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Abstract: For decades, social research has engaged the "linguistic turn," which was considered revolutionary in the ways that scholars began to reframe reality, knowledge, and representation. Among ethnographers, this turn was robustly embraced, especially at the level of intersubjectivity, reflexivity, and positionality in field practices. More recently, the performance paradigm reframed the field, the ethnographer, and her participants as embodied persons and places with bodied terrains and topographies. In my recent ethnographic life history study about Indian women's experiences in Hindu arranged marriages, I entered my field equipped theoretically with some knowledge of and keen awareness about the positional and performative contingencies that would unravel in the field because I was working with women who had made very disparate choices from my own. However, when it arrived, my *own* crisis of representation was material, textual, epistemological, and theoretical. My experiences in the field radically reconfigured my relationship to ethnographic representation—the textual, the performed, and the performative. In this paper, I show my arrivals and departures in and out of theory, text, and performance as I re-envision my fieldwork as a site of bodied and embodied "material performances"—both my own and my participants'. I turn specifically to a symbolic analysis of a poem, which came upon me during fieldwork in the form of a performance text. I refer to this poem as a *sideways mystory* which in its poetic form allowed me to shift from an interpreter of tales to a cultural critic who wants to uncover hidden truths and provoke the audience to think about complex realities and act.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The "linguistic turn" was considered revolutionary in social research because it enabled scholars to reframe reality, truth, knowledge, knowing, and representation. Ethnographers robustly embraced this turn, especially at the level of intersubjectivity, reflexivity, and positionality in field practices. In the discipline of Anthropology, Michael JACKSON's (1989) "radical empiricist" came to be center stage in discussions about the crisis of representation (see also BRUNER, 1993; CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986; GEERTZ, 1973; ROSALDO, 1989). A few decades ago, the performance paradigm reframed the field, the ethnographer,

and her participants as embodied persons and places with bodied terrains and topographies (CONQUERGOOD, 1985, 1991, 2002; TURNER, 1986). In my ethnographic life history study about Indian women's experiences in Hindu arranged marriages in Delhi, I ventured into my field equipped theoretically with some knowledge of and a keen awareness about the positional contingencies that would unravel in the field because I was working with women who had made very disparate choices from my own. I am both native and other to the field, as I live and work in Western academe, yet my erstwhile home is Delhi, a place I left one decade ago. I have no parental history of arranged marriages, yet a deep familiarity with it on a contextual level. I was single when I first began my field study, and became recently married "by choice" not arrangement—each status that re-problematizes my positionality in the research. In other words, I continue to straddle spaces of hybridity on various levels. [1]

I consider these hybrid spaces to be postcolonial locations which I initially understood too simplistically during early moments of fieldwork. By "postcolonial locations" I mean cultural locations that are "inevitably hybridized, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create and recreate local identity (TIFFIN, 1995, p.95). More generally, according to MADISON (2005, p.47), postcolonialism refers to "the multiple forms and locations of discourse, performance, politics, values, and the "everyday"—both past and present—that emanate from the history of colonialism." Indeed, I considered how my positions were shaping my interpretations, the role of reflexivity, and so on. However, these acknowledgments always seemed inadequate because I continued to experience a level of discomfort in how I spoke for, with, and about my participants. In the last three years of travels in, out, and between the field and home, I have come to understand this discomfort as a *postcolonial crisis* of representation, the latter being a phrase I was unable to understand in its materiality until I reached various scriptocentric impasses in writing. My *own* crises of representation took material, textual, epistemological, and theoretical forms. I found that my continuous experiences in the field were radically reconfiguring my relationship to ethnographic representation—the textual, the performed, and the performative. This was a time when I began to understand what the postcolonial condition means for ethnographers of any stripe, be they colonized or otherwise. This crisis forced upon me many questions: How do I bring my field alive as a living, breathing entity with vivid colors, sounds, smells, and tones? How can the stories we created—the lives I partook in, the women I keep returning to—be felt, smelled, and imagined with any organic reality? [2]

In this paper, I chart a trajectory of my crisis of representations illustrating the various routes I took in experiencing my field. These routes were straightforward reportage, the essay form, the narrative theoretical, and the memoir essay. Afterwards, I surprisingly found myself entering ethnopoetics. I did not seek a poetic performative form, rather it arrived in the midst of my field/home travels to enliven my field experience thereby returning to it a materiality that it had lost in previous representational modes. This essay is significant because it reinforces that ethnographic knowledge can be understood, found, and experienced in

multiple ways, and that representation is as much an epistemological and ontological process, as it is methodological. The ethnographic literature which I read prior to my fieldwork left me unprepared for my entry into the performative realm—an area that is often marginalized and relegated to the performance studies domain within anthropology. With this essay, I show my arrivals and entry into a performance paradigm and my struggles to understand how and why this entry has reconfigured my identity as an ethnographer and my relationship to my field. [3]

In particular, I turn to a poem entitled, "The Bangle Seller of *Meena Bazaar*" (CHAWLA, 2006) which came to be composed after one winter visit to my field. This poem is deeply linked yet disparate from prior "thematic," straightforward, and monolingual representations of my participants' lives. I refer to it as a *sideways mystory* which I define as an abstract (yet concrete) articulation of field characters, scenes (and themes), and scenarios which have their origins in the field and the words of my participants, but have been conjured up and discovered by me in poesies (see also DENZIN, 1997, 2003 for more on *mystory*). I consider my *mystory* to be a *sideways mystory* because it emerged as a non-linear process, engaged field-themes marginally, and came into being "aside" from my formal fieldwork practices. I take the reader through a symbolic analysis of "The Bangle Seller of *Meena Bazaar"* to understand how and why this poem emerged. My intent is to show how the verses intersect with moments, characters, and persons from my field. Alongside, I refer to how all these emergences were entwined with *my* shifting positionalities during fieldwork. My goal is finally to consider how it was in the poetic that I shifted from an interpreter of tales to an interpretive cultural critic who wants to uncover hidden truths and provoke the audience to think about complex realities and act (CONQUERGOOD, 1985, 1991, pp.188-189; DENZIN, 2003). In other words, the poem took the form of critical/cultural analysis becoming one postcolonial maneuver of recovery because as a *sideways mystory* it allowed me to take a moral stance and look at my field more critically. Ultimately my engagement with these matters tells readers about one person's sojourn into the realm of the performative, providing possible pathways that others might encounter as they read or listen to my field story. [4]

2. The Opening Movement: A Native/Other Dilemma

Let me begin here with a few words about ethnography, ethnographers, their multiplex identities, and their postcolonial condition. All ethnographers have the potential to misinterpret, misrepresent, be they native or other. Because ultimately, we are required to bring back stories about people unfamiliar to us or familiar for durations of time. Even so, I believe that misrepresentations can offer themselves up as distinct interpretive lenses and unveil the "difference that makes a difference" as Gregory BATESON (1972, p.459) would tell us. Other-ness is quite obviously a pre-condition to mis/interpretation. I remain mostly unworried about my status in the field, because the words of anthropologist Kirin NARAYAN (1993), we will always be outsiders in our fields because our lives are

a montage of locales—the foreign and the local coexisting everywhere and in every time. [5]

In my case, the native/other dilemma is many-fold—an Indian-Pakistani paternal family, an Indian-Burmese maternal family, a family that travels half a dozen languages and regions within India, a life lived in many degrees of Englishness, a migration here to the United States, a continued reverence as well as annoyance for the British, yet a fondness for the English language, which remains my first language even though my native tongue is Hindi. For many of us who grew up in post-colonized nations, multiplexity is the natural order of things (RODRIGUEZ, 2006). Yet this multiplexity—a feeling of affiliation for multiple identities—is not merely a postcolonial condition. In a fast-globalizing world (I say fast because the world has always been global, historically; technology has merely quickened our globality) postcoloniality itself needs to be differently understood and perhaps we might begin referring to it as a "glocal" or "neocolonial" condition (other scholars have been writing about these matters for some time; see APPADURAI, 2000; APPIAH, 2006; CONQUERGOOD, 2002; SPIVAK, 1990). Some miniscule local-global impressions come to my mind—the Burmese sushi chef, a resident of Singapore, who lives in my adopted hometown in Ohio and chats with me about Bollywood films; the mailperson in my neighborhood who greets me in Hindi with *namaste* and *phir milenge* (we'll meet again); the Caucasian pedestrian who recently greeted me in Hindi sentences and carried out a long conversation in what is supposed to be my native tongue—all this in small town middle America. This new world in which we all live is one that is "crisscrossed by transnational narratives, Diaspora affiliations, and especially, the movement and multiple migrations of people, sometimes voluntary, but often economically propelled and politically coerced" (CONQUERGOOD, 2002, p.145). Under such a scenario, we may "think of a "place" as a heavily trafficked intersection, a port of call and exchange, instead of circumscribed territory" (CONQUERGOOD, 2002, p.145). For persons living in this new global world, such multiplexity has become native and ordinary. [6]

For the last eight years, I have been involved in exploring contemporary urban Indian women's experiences in Hindu arranged marriages (CHAWLA, 2004). When I first started fieldwork, I was concerned with multiplexities *vis a vis* matters of reflexivity, subjectivity, and postitionality. I acknowledged concerns about how I might negotiate my various identities in the field. In a sort of politically correct postmodern fashion, I made claim to my various ethnic backgrounds, my insider-outsider status, my singlehood, and my Western academic training. Undoubtedly, such matters were crucial at that time. I had indeed encountered many reflexive crises to do with such positions in the field and I did include them in my writing. After my first phase of fieldwork, when I began the task of representation, I followed a somewhat linear path: translating field observations to text, recordings to transcript, and finally analysis to written products. I wrote the full report—my dissertation—which was extremely thick in description, seldom unkind, achingly reflexive, and even award-winning. Three years after these events occurred, I began to feel that that my immediate representations were mimetic, as I was trying to tell what I thought I had been told. Don't misunderstand me, I made no

pretense of objectivity in this mimesis, as I was reflexively thorough. The dissertation was a first rendering; I returned more fully to the field discourses to translate them into essays and articles. [7]

I immediately wrote a few reportage-like essays on marital conflict and resistance in arranged marriages (see CHAWLA, 2007a, 2007b). These essays were not social scientific in tone, but they seemed to want to mirror something real that I had experienced. I am not denigrating my efforts as I believe that there are some "truths," albeit partial, in these essays. Yet the discourses seemed to become "inorganic" and disembodied after I had thematized matters. In fact, as I was assembling the first few essays for publication, I began gravely to encounter the crisis of representation, something which was previously a challenge only at a conceptual level. I hit a proverbial textocentric/scriptocentric wall about the question much asked—how does this "process of lived experience becoming a text" (LAVIE, 1990, p.183) what we call ethnographic writing, get done? [8]

To surpass this crisis, I thought perhaps I needed to understand the stories in more nuanced ways. I understood my fussiness arising out of a limited understanding of stories and storytelling. I felt that my representational paralysis was rooted in the disconnection between the told story and the heard story. My first "tango" with addressing the crisis began here. I problematized storytelling suggesting that my experience of stories was rooted in Western notions of temporality. I am aware that humans experience time as events and they cannot be nowhere and in no time in the course of living, however an over-emphasis on time became my central critique and I presented such a story form as a problem in itself. Anthropologically, I even thought my concern was with what GEERTZ (1989) referred to as the "missing genre"—the disconnection between the stories in-situ, the interpretation, and representation. I put forth the idea that I was constantly caught between stories and theories—a liminal intellectual space (CHAWLA, 2007c). [9]

Problematizing the story certainly helped, but a material sense of the field remained elusive. For the first time I began to understand more clearly the classical themes of displacement and dislocation that are central in postcolonial theorizing (ANZALDUA, 1987; BHABHA, 1994; FANON, 2004; MINH-HA, 1989, RODRIGUEZ, 2006). I wondered if I would ever be able to tell complete stories. Because if one comprehends in interrupted rhythms, how does one represent in complete ones? I do not want to rehearse what postcolonial scholars have written about such matters. Yet, in arriving at a storytelling crisis—how do I tell this story—I was meeting head first a postcolonial dilemma. [10]

Derek Wolcott, the Caribbean poet from Trinidad and Tobago, has recently said that language betrays an immigrant on a continual basis (see also FANON, 1967). Please note, my mention of language has very little to do with skill or competence. And, my interpretation of immigrant is broad—I see all ethnographers as perennial immigrants. The betrayal Wolcott is referring to is one of coherence and experience. If one experiences fractured histories and the world one knows is a landscape of constant interruptions, then our knowledge of

the world is impressionistic (not fragmented, I react to that word as one that suggests an unstable epistemology). I think of postcolonial people who live on the interstices between un/stable worlds as persons who are bound to interruptions. Their ways of speaking with, speaking for, or performing is rooted in an inherently interrupted ontology. V.S. NAIPAUL (2007), the Trinidad born Indian writer, in a recent essay in *The Guardian*, "The Long Way Around," talks about coming to such an understanding when he began writing:

> "To pretend that I came out of a society as complete and ordered would in some ways have made writing easier ... Every simple statement I could make about myself or my family background had to be qualified in some way...my world as a writer was full of flight and unfinished experience, full of the odds and ends of cultures and migrations, from India to the New World in 1880-1900, from the New World to Europe in 1950, things that did not make a whole. There was nothing like the stability of the rooted societies that had produced the great fictions of the 19th century, in which, for example, even a paragraph of a fairytale could suggest a whole real world. And soon I saw myself at the end of the scattered island material I carried with me." [11]

My own impasse is similar to NAIPAUL's and being from many places (or no place) I too carry with me scattered materials from the subcontinent. In my straightforward textual reportage of women in arranged marriages, the style I was trying to imbibe was orderly and structured—that of the anthropological monograph. I was looking for plotted, charactered, and emplotted stories, naively hoping they existed. The style I was seeking refused to acknowledge the fluidity, the interruptions, and the remnants that were/are my/their world and the remnants that came into being with my engagement in Other worlds. [12]

3. The Second Movement: Poetic Interruptions

This is how I arrived at my own crisis of representation and experienced with some tangibility the reality of my postcolonial condition. My worries about this post-colonial crisis were many. I must note here a dissatisfaction with the word—*representation*. Perhaps the crisis is a struggle/a rupture/an interruption and to represent is to narrate/perform/embody because to represent on its own has textual undercurrents (CONQUERGOOD, 2002). My struggle was an inability to bring the field alive as an organism, as a living breathing entity with colors, sounds, smells, and tones. I asked myself why I was unable to accomplish this even though I had been vulnerably reflexive? I began to question what it actually meant to be reflexive. First, I realized that my reflexivity was limited because it was too textual. I was feeling bound to it, and in fact I felt I was paying lip-service to positionality because I needed to—my training had instilled this into me. Second, it became clear to me that I had envisioned a Western audience when I claimed my field. I needed to imagine an audience which included my own terrains—both the complete and the incomplete. In short, I believe I needed to see my field as hybrid, polivocal, and interrupted like my own experiences. The third problematic was that I was putting my bets on language as provocateur, only I myself felt unprovoked by it. My native-ness was feeling left out in the language I was using. For, I felt bodily "outside" of my field notes and the writing "about" my

participants. I would attempt to tell one story from my field and many interrelated plots would emerge in desperate disorder, which I would ignore because they interfered with my systematic analysis. Ultimately, I felt that I was failing as a storyteller—and ethnography to me is nothing if not a storytelling art. [13]

Mostly, I wanted to re/create the sights, sounds, smells, aesthetics, colors—senses from the field that were difficult, sometimes impossible to convey or capture. My first attempt to do this occurred in the weeks/months following my return from the field. As part of my research practices, I spent many hours with woman after woman listening to them recall their childhood, and their lives before and after marriage. As women co-narrated their childhood stories, I found the mother-daughter relationship emerging as a leitmotif. Listening to them made me remember and also re-imagine my own mother. It is clear to me now that the physical circumstances of fieldwork had occasioned these memories. I was staying with my mother during my fieldwork, after being "away" from India for almost seven years, Thus the field was a "return" to my mother and to my home. However, I forced myself away from these issues while in-situ. It was impossible to keep the memories at bay as my mother and my childhood kept returning. [14]

In the months after I returned from the field, I simultaneously performed and wrote, "*The First Disciple*," a mother-memoir which seemed to have been inspired by the life stories of three of my participants. When it first came to me, and it did quite suddenly in the oral rather than the written form, I disregarded it as lyrical prose (CHAWLA, 2007d). I would speak sentences aloud and before I knew it I had a lyrical prose text that was heavy with religious imagery, Hindustani words, saris, gods, deities, disciples, and so on. It read more like poetry, but I did not write it as such. I remember the physical act of arriving at it—the memories would often arrive at night when I would remember my mother's saris, her hair, her room, and the various gods she worships. Since I was transcribing at that time and was enmeshed in mother-stories, my mother seemed to be emerging as a composite character out of my field mothers. I was creating a new "her" in performance. In these moments I was experiencing for the first time, performance ethnography. In a very general sense, performance ethnography is a staged reenactment of field notes, interviews, and observations (ALEXANDER, 2004). In this case, I staged "*The First Disciple*" in front of an audience (in a small theater in a college town in Middle America) as if I was directly addressing my mother using a form that I was neither familiar with nor trained in. Consider these excerpts:

> "*I see you reclining on the maroon divan. This evening you are folded into a gold* Benarasi *sari. As always there is a quarter-sized deep red* bindi *in the center of your forehead. A size that only you were always brave enough to wear. In your ears are clasped those pearl and diamond earrings that you have now given me. Your endless black tresses curve smoothly into your body's secrets. Your almond-shaped dark brown eyes are deeply* kajal-*lined, and you wear a small solitaire in your nose. They always tell me that your nose is patrician and that unfortunately I did not inherit its sharpness. Mine is thicker, the worse half of Papa's. A thickness I so loathed that I never did get it pierced. But this is about you, mother, so let me not digress.*

> *In those years you were the home deity. And, I? I was your first disciple. Even when your hair began turning gray and lines shadowed your eyes. Even when your shiny black hair became colored black hair. Even when your blouses no longer plunged into your cleavage and your saris began to be tucked above the navel. Even when you filled out and your curves grew rounder and you were no longer the queen of the* Mushairas*. Even after the even when's, you were magic for a very long time. A tapering magic that lingered ...*
>
> *I don't remember you except in these fragile and frayed layers of nostalgia. I also don't remember you because you were there and you were not there. I would watch you when I could. Yes, perhaps, you woke us up and sent us to school in the morning, and you cooked sometimes, and you helped with homework. But, I don't remember those mundane things that we did everyday. I know there were lunch boxes, uniforms, and math. All I can remember is the magic ...*
>
> *Of course you will laugh if you hear this, but let me tell you about your room. It is the temple of my childhood memories. As the most sacred part of you, it was even purer than the* mandir *in which you prayed. The bathroom in your room was the hoarder of your secrets. Your baths were always long. I wondered what you did because I was never allowed inside. As a willing disciple does, I always waited. I knew that there was a long white porcelain tub in which you reclined. Sometimes, I heard you hum leisurely, and from the bubbly splashes I knew you were soaping yourself. Then you would sway out with a towel wrapped like a sarong under your arms. If I was caught peeping, you would shoo me away and close the bedroom door to be with your secrets ...*" (CHAWLA, 2007d, p.359). [15]

This staged performance occurred alongside my "formal" transcription and analysis. Worried that the personal was interfering with the field, I set aside this performance for almost two years and continued to work in a reportage style only to be drawn back to it again. A few years on, I wrote my story of its arrival—showing where and how the memoir and the words of my participants were recursively entwined (see CHAWLA, 2007d). As I did this, I realized that the process of composing "*The First Disciple*" had been oral and aural rather than textual and literal. In experiencing it, I found that the stories I had understood in impressions, were asking to be expressed. In performing these processes I was experiencing the field, corporeally. Dwight CONQUERGOOD (1986, p.36) has pointed out that it is "performance that realizes experience" and not the reverse (see also MADISON, 2005). The literary critic Mikhail BAKHTIN (1981) too affirms the precedence of performance when he tells us:

> "After all, there is no such thing as experience outside of embodiment in signs. It is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around—expression organizes experience. Expression is what gives experience its form and specificity of direction" (see MADISON, 2005, p.152). [16]

"*The First Disciple*" was my first entry into anthropological performance; it was a vignette, a whimsical fancy from the field. Having experienced it, I assumed that my forays into performance would end, but the poetic form persisted and insisted on expression. [17]

A year and a half year ago, my position in the field shifted—perceptually and literally. I got married. I was now partially akin to my participants—an insider by way of my marital status and an outsider because I chose my own groom. My wedding took place in New Delhi in December 2005. I'd stayed in touch, on a fairly regular basis, with many of my participants some of whom attended the wedding festivities. In fact, one of them, Neeta, who owned a clothes boutique, stitched many of my clothes for the various Hindu wedding ceremonies. Mini, an older participant, outfitted me with silver anklets and silver toe-rings. These were "essential" for me to wear as a bride, she said. Involving my research participants in my own wedding was certainly making the field come full circle, and I felt as if I was entering, at least in ritual, the material reality of my participants' experiences. [18]

In the weeks following the wedding ceremonies, I found myself besieged once more by the poetic form. Even though in my earlier lyrical experience with "*The First Disciple*," I had "performed" a memoir, the piece remained a lyrical essay with a rhythmic timbre. But, this following poem "The Bangle Seller of *Meena Bazaar*" arrived as poetry. I did not think about writing it nor did I arrange it. I found myself beginning to compose it one morning a week after my wedding. The characters, the street, the colors, and even the conversations in it seemed transported from my own wedding. Yet, the persons in the poem were much more than a mere snapshot of the week-long event—in them I had poeticized the "prior" field story. In this section, I present the poem and proceed further with a symbolic analysis of the verses interpolated with my field narratives to show how, for me, the two are inherently linked—aesthetically, theoretically, and emotionally. [19]

3.1 The bangle seller of *Meena Bazaar*[1]

For sure, I have missed these streets;
I have longed for
this bazaar with its
cunning merchants.
Cajoling, juggling, peddling—

Bangles for your wedding, madam
Bindis for your sweet forehead, sister
Little girl, buy some Fair and Lovely cream
to make you as pale as Madonna,
even like Aishwarya Rai,
our own Indian Miss World.

1 As an aside, when I wrote the poem, I sent it for publication as it was—without an explanatory story. I began to think about writing an explanation only because I was interesting in understanding how the process took shape. The poem, therefore, stands alone as a field story. This is another layer of understanding that I add to it. Permission has been taken and granted for use of this poem in this essay vis a vis the copyright agreement with *Qualitative Inquiry*, the outlet in which this poem was published in 2006.

Sweet maiden, fairness will bring love,
I promise you.

Sometimes they will invoke Sania Mirza
who is no beauty off the tennis court.
These little stores where
I have skipped around
ever since I can remember.
With my eyes shut and
even in dreams
I know every corner
of this Meena *Bazaar.*
For buttons, there is the needle shop,
for threads, there is the Shehzaadi boutique.
I know their location because
I know the henna-bearded man
of the myopic eyes
who sold me buttons for that silk *Shalwar Kameez.*

And, the bangle shop
is somewhere
around a thirty degree turn
to which I am led
when the bangle seller calls out
pleading me to match
the bangles to my *Shalwar Kameez*—

Sister, how can you
wear that heavenly silk without bangles?
It is inhuman, sister, a curse
to leave such cloth un-praised.
For it may become lonesome.
Here, come here,
see how these orange bangles
make the silk glow.
Buy them, sister, and
the sun will shine from this cloth,
even from your face,
and you will be lonely no more.

I laugh, I resist,
and like a magnet I face him.
I kneel in front of him,
who lounges on
the white mattress
haloed by the multicolored
twinkles of his livelihood.

Yes, him, I remember.
He is younger,
with eyes blackened to coals by *Surma*, and
a red scarf knotted on his neck, sideways.
Him, in a cream silk *sherwani,*
outfitted like a groom.

Yes, I remember him
clasping my hands
in his bejeweled ones.
Stroking the wrist, the fingers,
and brushing over the nails,
and remembering
to run over the cuticles;
he is measuring the size
to slip on the orange glass circulars.
Skin squeezes skin
as orange glass slides across
my un-protesting limbs.
He smiles at the beauty
or the sensation?
He continues until
each hand is clasped by a dozen.
Different shades of orange;
Sunrise orange, sunset orange,
night orange, day orange—

Take them all, sister.
When you are tired, wear the sunset.
In happiness, wear the sunrise.

With your love, wear the night.
And wear the day, when alone.
He strokes them, us,
my fingers and the shimmering circles,
one by one.
He leaves me mesmerized
with colors,
or sensation?
Has he rehearsed this adorning?
again and again?
differently and same?
Has he stroked like this
into other sisters
these same circular longings?
He knows that I,
and they
will come to him
again and again.
Girls aching to be women;
Women soon to be brides;
Matrons chasing baser passions.
He will become
a different man
to every wrist.
A groom, a gigolo, a lover,
a knight, a usurper, a brother.
Yes, I remember him.
(CHAWLA, 2006, pp.1135-1138) [20]

4. Poetic Arrivals and Departures

I wrote this poem almost two and a half years after my first travels into the field. It is certainly not a genre I anticipated nor an area in which I am trained (aside from a love for poetry and prose). It seems to me now that it exists as a flesh and bones experience of my time in-situ. I must have known, noticed, and observed all the characters that I created, but I discovered them only in this performative text. I performed this poem as an art form. Only when it seemed finished did I begin to make overt field connections. In this section, I offer a brief symbolic analysis of the poem to demonstrate why and how this poem, for me, is linked to particular moments in the field. Even as I do so, I assert and caution that this analysis constitutes my *own* interpretation and readers may experience the poetry, its

emergence, and my analysis in other interpretive veins. In fact, I welcome newer interpretations from readers and even myself. [21]

One of the domains of questioning in my life-history interviews engaged my participants to talk about their premarital lives. In story after story, I was given details of parental as well as individual criteria for suitable grooms. My participants sketched different types of men that they longed for, needed, or desired. These criteria often went hand in hand with material longings for clothes, jewels, homes, and places. Eventually, I thematized these desires into a Shared Experience entitled, "Self-Defining the Marriage," which was explored by my participants in differing ways. Geeta[2], for instance, wanted:

> "A comfortable house, a room of my own, you know?" (Geeta)
>
> "Someone from a good background, it does not matter whether the family is wealthy or not, but the guy should have a good education and should be holding a good post." (Jhumpa)
>
> "If someone used to ask me what kind of a boy I wanted, I would say: someone who had a nice kitchen, who had a good bathroom, who was smart and handsome. (Husband's) Salary *did* matter to me. It had to be good, so that I could have a luxurious life." (Meena)
>
> "You/I wanted a loving, caring and smart boy. Mainly—he should be caring, he should listen to you, he should be loving. He should understand you. It used to feel good that I will have so many clothes to wear, and jewelry and that we will go out and there will be someone to love you and care for you." (Reema)
>
> "I had thought about a lot of the things that we would do, like roaming around, traveling and all that. That we will be like friends. That we should be like friends. You know whatever a girl wishes and thinks of I used to think of all that and want all that." (Sonia) [22]

As I listened to these conditions, desires, and longings, an image took shape in my mind of a groom/man who was handsome, educated, smart, friendly, fun, caring—in short, coveted. In the poem, I subconsciously did with the bangle seller what each woman had done with her sketch. I composed an image of a person who would take shifting roles for different women—"a different man for every wrist"—trying to show the "desires" of my participants and hinting at "passion"—a topic that did not solidify into a theme and stayed outside of my interview transcripts. In creating the bangle seller, I felt licensed to embed in him the feminine sexual desires of my participants, a discussion to which I return in this essay. [23]

Once I had composed a character, I constructed a stage by creating the image of a bazaar as a place where objects are meant to be on display and where their prices are negotiated and contracted—much like the arranged marriage as it was

2 All names and identifying information about participants have been changed to protect their privacy (in this manuscript as well as the dissertation study). This research was granted human subjects clearance and followed the Purdue University human subject guidelines for interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. I refer to my brother in this essay and have taken creative/autobiographical/non-fictional license to speak for him and summarize some of our conversations.

described to me. The bazaar was how I experienced the criteria that my participants spoke about. The bazaar is a metaphor, in this poem, for the marital contract. It is a place where things are shown and seen by customers. Incidently, *Meena Bazaar* is a "real" place in many Indian cities where wedding accessories are sold. It is a place which I too frequented in preparation for my own wedding. My own experience of the bazaar helped me "hear" my participants talk about the way they were on display when they first were introduced to the men they were to marry. In my straightforward writing, I did indeed acknowledge this objectification by creating a theme which I referred to as, "Enacting the First Meeting." The first meeting in an arranged marriage is an important symbolic event that takes place in a neutral setting such as a restaurant or a friend's home with both the potential bride and groom and their parents in tow. In traditional families, this meeting is the first time that the bride and groom meet each other. My participants described this meeting in an intimately detailed, ambivalent, often rebellious manner:

> "My parents had already met him. Earlier he was staying in Chennai. And they met him in Kovalam, where his dad and my dad had gone for a conference. They are both from the oil industry. So my mom had already met him, spoke to him and everything. So then he was in Bombay for some work and so my dad called him up and asked him to come over to the club. And my dad was waiting with him there and my mom was supposed to come with my and my sister. I entered the place and he got up and he said, 'Hi.' We spoke a little and stuff. There was this light kind of feeling. Like my heart was not heavy, it was light. So, I thought, oh God, this is a good sign and what not. This was very stupid actually." (Jhumpa)
>
> "I used to always tell my father that there was no need to show me to anyone. We always had arguments on this subject. I used to feel that many men chase after me and I would not even look at them, they chase me like puppies wagging their tails and such people (their parents) are being invited to my house and they would come in and act superior. They thought they were interviewing me. So that used to make my head spin and I used to get very angry." (Neeta)
>
> "So this was the first time someone was coming to see me at home and I rebelled at the thought that how can someone come and look at you. I was sort of resentful of that. Nevertheless, I sat through the session and I remember that guy's mother telling me that her eldest son was married to a highly qualified woman who has a double M.A. And so, I asked, 'What does she do?' She said, 'No, she is in the house, she helps me, she's a homemaker, and we have great fun, sometimes we make pizzas at home, sometimes we cook Italian food.' So I sort of looked at her and I said, 'What about all her education, how is she putting that to good use?' And that woman says, 'No, no our daughter-in-laws don't work.' I sort of gave up in about a jiffy, flat. I said the guy maybe whoever he is, but there is absolutely no way I am going to Los Angeles to marry a character who is going to make me sit at home, make pizzas and Italian food. I sort of chased them out by behaving fairly brusque. I sort of you know wasn't in any case the coy demure variety. The moment I realized this didn't suit me I was the least bit, you know I wasn't hospitable, I wasn't polite, I was just withdrawn, wouldn't speak until spoken to, and then in monosyllables really, so that they didn't think that I was a nice wholesome girl in any case. I mean I followed that till the time that I was 28." (Naina) [24]

The first meeting was a multi-layered event illustrated well by the above discourses—for Jhumpa it was romantic, for Neeta it was an objectification of self, and for Naina it was an act of resistance. In my ethnographic monograph style of writing, it was easy for me to thematize these meetings into three such acts, but in poetry they seemed to emerge and be experienced in the form of a market place—the bazaar. [25]

Alongside, the bazaar was the way I too was experiencing the arranged marriage in the home/field. During my fieldwork when I was meeting woman after woman, my older brother—who eventually married by arrangement—was also meeting woman after woman, only in his case it was for a life-partner. As his sister, I was a spectator to "his" first meetings. After many of these, he would give me his version of events and why he was rejecting someone. To me his reasons for rejecting women seemed trivial—they were too thin, too heavy, too tall, too short, not fair enough, too old, too successful, and so on. Needless to say I was uncomfortable when I heard his comments about the women. In these conversations, I found that the home and the field were collapsing into each other, and the bazaar was coming into being. [26]

The imagery of the bangles is, in retrospect, more obviously rooted in the Indian conception of a wedding. For those of us who have roots in the subcontinent the bangle imagery is clearly connected to weddings. Bangles represent and invoke marriage and marital status in many communities in India and cut across religious groups—Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Jains. They denote commitment as well as beauty and celebration. At the same time, they represent playfulness because they have sexual and sensual connotations. The sheer wearing of them in a bazaar is a sensual act—especially in places like the *Meena Bazaar* where male hands often touch female hands in the adorning of bangles. For this occasion, *touching* occurs without censure and is socially sanctioned even though male-female touching in public remains taboo in most parts of rural and urban India save the upper classes. The imagery of the bangles—rich, orange, ornate, red—is deliberate because I wanted to invoke the colors of marriage and fertility among Hindus in this area. I was unconsciously referencing another broad theme that emerged in the life histories—Self-defining the Marriage as Celebration. For many of my participants, the marriage was associated with the wedding ceremony, festivities, and adornment. For instance Deeya, who was married at the age of 17, spoke of understanding marriage in terms of shopping for a trousseau (clothes and accessories for a bride):

> "My mother would always come home with, you know, with things like jewelry and clothes and (ask us), 'Do you like this and do you like that?' So we always knew that she was preparing our trousseau because ever since we were 13 and 14 she had been showing us things we would wear." (Deeya)
>
> "Like I was 3 ½ years old when I first got to know that marriage is celebration. So I turned around and asked mo, 'You think I am going to get married?' She said, 'Yes you will.' So my mom had this beautiful gold bracelet, a huge thing. I said, 'You know

> when I marry I am going to wear that, so please put it away and don't wear it.' And she never wore it. I got it finally on my marriage." (Geeta) [27]

As I heard such stories, I remembered my own mother's shopping sprees from when I was barely 12-13 years old. I grew up watching her purchase saris, clothes, and jewelry for my own wedding. Discussions about how many gold bangles I would receive, what linens and cutlery would be bought for my new home, whether or not I would receive diamonds and so on were common as I was growing up. [28]

Along with speaking of the material aspects of the wedding, my participants also hinted at qualities that made them/us eligible as good brides. These descriptions led to the emergence of the color-refrain in my poem. One of the refrains in their stories seemed to be a desire and a longing to be fair-skinned (light-skinned). Other good "wifely" qualities included being tall, a good worker, loving, and selfless. While many of the color conversations did not find their way into my data-recorder, they were indirectly present. All this while, I had been experiencing indirectly my brother's rejection of many women because he did not find them fair enough. As a co-participant, I knew that fairness was/is a prized commodity for the single north Indian woman as a physical characteristic that will bring many things, including a suitable groom and love. As far back as I can remember, I was told to stay away from the sun so that my skin wouldn't darken further and my wedding prospects would remain encouraging. Thus, I decided to deliberately maintain a tongue-in-cheek refrain to fairness throughout the poem. Having done this, I became the first-person voice in the poem. My role, in this poem as well as the study, was/is that of an ethnographer who is simultaneously surveying and experiencing the terrain of these women's marital experiences. [29]

5. A Forward Movement: A *Sideways Mystory* as a Critical/Performative Act

I consider *"*The Bangle Seller of *Meena Bazaar"* to be a performance text in which I brought alive the field in both real and imagined ways thus "making experience concrete, anchoring it in the here and now" (PAGET, 1993, p.40). In it, I instigated the mergence of multiple voices and experiences, and in doing so experienced the intermingling of performance, ethnography, and cultural studies (CONQUERGOOD, 1992, p.80). At the same time my turn to verse performance signals a shift in my positionality as an ethnographer who constantly feels the tug and pull between abstracted textual representation a more organic performative representation. Such performance texts create spaces for the commingling of multiple experiences, standpoints, and voices in distinct times and places (DENZIN, 1997, 2003). Such texts when performed, in Trinh T. MINH-HA's (1989, p.162) words, "explain the truth of life's fictions in which experiences are evoked, not explained". And, it is evocation that frees ethnography from mimesis and linear representation (CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986). [30]

As a specific genre, I view this poem as a *mystory* because it functions as a reflexive and critical tale that is situated in my experience, but at the same time

collides aesthetically with the functional and structural aspects of the same experience (DENZIN, 1997). It is, "simultaneously a personal mythology, a public story, and a performance that critiques... and as a personal text is grafted into discourses from popular culture and locates itself against the specialized knowledges that circulate in the larger society" (DENZIN, 1997, p.116). For me, this *mystory* brings to life/embodies—with some variance—the textual themes I created out of the discourses embedded in my study. The poem enacts the themes articulated by my participants, yet it does so using a verse form in which my own voice, the streets, my participants, and the imaginary co-exist in what DENZIN (1997) refers to as an "ethnopoetic messy reflexivity." Once performed and so experienced, it critiques larger systems of personal, popular, and expert knowledge. I claim this *mystory* as a *sideways mystory* which I define as an abstract (yet concrete) articulation of field characters, scenes (and themes), and scenarios which have their origins in the field and the words of my participants, but are conjured up and discovered by me in an aesthetic, non-fictive, and fictive forms. [31]

Such interactions between and betwixt genres are indeed performative. If one understands performativity, following BUTLER (1990) as an internalized "stylized repetition of acts" which are a hegemonic reiteration of a norm or a set of norms inherited by the status quo—citationality—then understanding my poem as a stylized repetition of fieldwork is a simple explanation at best. Under such an understanding, it remains a representation, albeit an aesthetic one. However, if performativity is understood as an "intervention upon citationality" and of resisting citationality, then this aesthetic form becomes a subversive activity (summarized from MADISON & HAMERA, 2007). My own interest lies in exploring this subversive shift which, according to postcolonial theorist Homi BHABHA (1994, pp.146-149), evokes the meaning of performative as an action that disturbs, disrupts, and disavows hegemonic formations" (see also BUTLER, 1990; DOLAN, 2001; MADISON & HAMERA, 2007). For BHABHA performativity consists of discursive acts that "insinuate, interrupt, interrogate, and antagonize powerful master-discourses" and he links performance to "breaking and remaking" (as quoted in CONQUERGOOD, 1992, p.84) Exploring such subversive performativity further, MADISON and HAMERA (2007, p.xix) point out that:

> "When we rework performativity beyond a 'stylized representation of acts' into the more deeply relevant evocation of performativity as 'non-esentialized constructions of identity,' what does then it actually look like? Performativities are significantly and powerfully layered in the day-to-day, yet they are heightened and embossed in cultural performances. It is in cultural performance where performativities are doubled with a difference: they are re-presented, re-located and re-materialized for the possibility of a substantial re-consideration and re-examination." [32]

My performance text/*sideways mystory* materialized within a performativity that opened up newer meanings and allowed me to critique. In the verse form, I was able to address what I deliberately left out in previous forms of representation—my own critique of the wedding, the marriage, and other cultural performances in which I found myself entangled. I believe that I used the classic function of

poetry, which is a performative break with everyday speech, to evoke memories of the ethos of the community (TYLER, 1986). In such a performative text, I became *more* than the ethnographer of Hindu arranged marriages; I shifted into the role of a cultural critic and took a moral stance (CONQUERGOOD, 1985). I believe that with poetry, I entered the realm of dialogical performance, a performative stance that:

> "struggles to bring different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs, so that they can have a conversation with one another. The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another. It is a kind of performance that resists conclusions. It is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue between performer and text open and ongoing. Dialogic understanding does not end with empathy." (CONQUERGOOD, 1985, p.9) [33]

As a performer, I was also able to bring alive the spaces, meanings, ambiguities, and contradictions of the culture without "explaining" them or celebrating them voyeuristically (CONQUERGOOD, 1985). My performance text interacted with a "prior text, field notes, interviews" and created what was previously veiled in the prior text. I believe that with this performance text, my *own* move into the critical/performative mode occurred in four notable ways. [34]

The first critical choice I made was to access irony/humor in order to address colorism. My references to light skin are ironical and function as a consistent refrain in the performance text. This was a rhetorical strategy that did not find a presence in my straightforward writing because at that time I felt humor was inappropriate and unethical in representation. Even though the privilege accorded to light skin among Indians is indeed my reality, I referenced it rather clinically in prior writing. In this poem, I brought it to the forefront in irony by making references to "fair" female popular culture figures from contemporary India and the US—the tennis player Sania Mirza, Bollywood star and Miss World Aishwarya Rai, and Madonna. I felt licensed to use lines such as, "who is no beauty off the tennis court," to make my point about the colonial color complex that plagues castes and classes of Indian society where even contemporarily, good looks in women (and sometimes men) are associated with light skin. I now know that I was asserting for myself and my participants that I resist such "colorism." In humor I can take back my brown skin, or at least attempt to. Therefore, I accessed irony as a "survival skill, a tool for acknowledging complexity, a means for exposing or subverting oppressive hegemonic ideologies, and an art for affirming life in the face of objective troubles" (FISCHER, 1986, p.224). This recovery is, to me, a moral act as it uncovers hidden truths and wants (and I want) to provoke the audience to think about these realities and act (CONQUERGOOD, 1985). Finally, irony enabled me to make the move from the personal to the political and thus move the poem into the public sphere. [35]

Secondly, for me, the invocation of the bangle seller's persona is in itself a critical performative act. I created a pirate-like, hennaed, somewhat emasculated man—the husband my participants talked about. In the first meetings with their potential grooms, my participants were *shown* to many men. In these occasions some of

them resisted their objectification, yet others reconciled themselves to that cultural ritual. The meeting was certainly not a desired event and there remained ambivalence about its occurrence. One could say that the poem in its creation of the bangle seller and the bazaar resists this meeting by reversing the equation and making my participants go and see the groom in the bazaar—*the sold become the buyers and the sellers become the sold*. Nevertheless, this resistance remains truncated because the groom retains power in the bazaar, he gets and takes his pick and remains unaffected by the frenzy. The women may have become the "observers," but they return—"again and again"—as seekers of many persons—a groom, a gigolo, a lover, a knight, a brother, a usurper. [36]

The references to the sexual and the sensual as feminine desires were my third critical maneuvers. Some of my participants confided in me their dissatisfaction in their sexual relations with their husbands. These women described the unhappiness they felt in their sexual lives and evinced a longing for passionate marriages. Sexuality and sexual relations were matters I side-stepped in the life histories as I felt that these matters failed to make concrete thematic experiences (only five of my 20 participants spoke of their sexual lives; most did it indirectly and often "aside" from the recorded interviews). Thus, I kept sexual imagery absent in my "prior text." However, something about these conversations must have lingered because I arrived at sexual and sensual imagery in the performance text—"skin squeezes skin ... matrons chasing baser passions ... lovers—" in the verse form. The performance allowed me to speak the unspoken and enact the unsystematic—the theme that resisted being a theme or the theme *I* resisted making into a theme. In the poetry, I told the stories that I had previously set aside because they had no name, no body, and no legitimacy—or so I thought. They fell outside the lines I had created and those that were created for me. [37]

Finally, my fourth critical act was an overarching one and it occurred at the level of language. This was a point that I had "almost" arrived at with my previous mother-memoir, "*The First Disciple*"—in performance, I began actively intermingling English with Hindustani words. In my monograph style of writing "about" my participants, I deliberately removed Hindustani words from all transcripts, analysis, field notes, and so on. Within the poetic/performative approach, I felt comfortable writing bilingually thereby maintaining and even bringing in with a certain deliberateness—words in Hindustani (Urdu and Hindi)—the most commonly spoken language in Delhi, the language I speak at home, and the language my participants shifted to in their conversations with me. I did not consciously use Hindustani words, but once they had emerged, I felt compelled to retain them in the performance. In fact, I consider this is a postcolonial maneuver of recovery—a resistant act against writing hegemonies that veil indigenous languages and knowledge, a resistant act also against scriptocentric epistemologies (CONQUERGOOD, 2002). In switching between Hindustani and English, I was using "interlingusitic play" which often refers to inter-reference—the creation of the text as a space between two worlds, not as a space where these worlds merge, but a space that embodies the membrane-like quality of multiplex, transnational, diasporic, and shifting realities (FISCHER,

1986). I want to again state that these maneuvers were by no means conscious on my part—I found myself doing them and then understanding the experience once it was performed. Most crucially, I began to experience ethnography as "a search for understanding that begins with cultural performance" (FABIAN, 1990, p.259). [38]

As an ethnographer, this move is critical because it means understanding ethnography as a performative process that privileges "particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience grounded in historical process, contingency, and ideology" (CONQUERGOOD, 1991, p.187). CONQUERGOOD rightly points out that the ethnographic enterprise is seeped with political knowledge, even though linear texts often veil this type of knowledge. My former ethnographic selves were naively interested in position, reflexivity, the etic, the emic, and so on. Moving into performance compelled me to take seriously the notion of interpretation as a political act and recognize that the exercise is manifold—it is about that which is being experienced and *also* about all the forces impacting the experiencing. This process of knowledge is deeply moral and political, yet gets bleached off in linear, literal, and even reflexive representation. [39]

By submitting to ethnopoetics and accessing a subversive performativity, I experienced new moral, critical, and political worlds within my field. Although my poem might fall inside various performance genres, it remains for me a poetic *mystory*—a messy performance text that moves back and forth between description, voice, and interpretation (the readers and my own) (DENZIN, 1997). Like all messy texts, it erases the dividing line between the observer and the observed, between audience and performer, and between fact and fiction. It is local situated knowledge about the practices of a given group (my group) of people. At the same time, it makes the writer/ ethnographer/the performer's experience central to the topic at hand. DENZIN (1997, p.226) points out and I concur, "good ethnography always uses language poetically, and good poetry always brings a situation alive in the mind of the reader." Ultimately, that is what I experienced with this poem. I began to find traces of the flesh and bones of my field, and in so doing, I found ways to critique and hopefully incite culture. [40]

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