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Im/possible Lives: Gender, Class, Self-Fashioning, and Affinal Solidarity in Modern South Asia

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Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic research and employing a micro-historical approach that recognizes not only the transnational but also the culturally specific manifestations of modernity, this article centers on the efforts of a young woman to negotiate shifting and conflicting discourses about what a good life might consist of for a highly educated and high caste Hindu woman living at the margins of a nonetheless globalized world. Newly imaginable worlds in contemporary Mithila, South Asia, structure feeling and action in particularly gendered and classed ways, even as the capacity of individuals to actualize those worlds and the "modern" selves envisioned within them are constrained by both overt and subtle means. In the context of shifting cultural anchors, new practices of silence, literacy, and even behaviors interpreted as "mental illness" may become tactics in an individual's negotiation of conflicting self-representations. The confluence of forces at play in contemporary Mithila, moreover, is creating new structures of feeling that may begin to reverse long-standing locally held assumptions about strong solidarities between natal families and daughters, on the one hand, and weak solidarities between affinal families and new daughters-in-law, on the other.

Keywords

Modernity; globalization; South Asia; gender; class; youth; family dynamics; fashion; self; speech

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Introduction: A micro-history of modernity

Saraswati grew up in the Mithila region of South Asia at the turn of the millennium.[1] The story presented here centers on Saraswati's efforts to create a viable adult life in the context of shifting and conflicting discourses about what a good life might consist of for a highly educated and high caste Hindu woman living at the margins of a nonetheless globalized world. I will argue two main, intertwined points. First, newly imaginable worlds in contemporary Mithila structure feeling and action in particularly gendered and classed ways, even as the capacity of individuals to actualize those worlds and the "modern" selves envisioned within them – an example of what Ortner (2006a) has called "agency-as-projects" -- are constrained by both overt and subtle means. As we will see, in the context of shifting cultural anchors, new practices of silence, literacy, and even behaviors interpreted as "mental illness" may become tactics in an individual's negotiation of conflicting self-representations. Second, I suggest that the confluence of forces at play is creating new structures of feeling that may begin to reverse long-standing locally held assumptions about strong solidarities between natal families and daughters, on the one hand, and weak solidarities between affinal families and new daughters-in-law, on the other.[2]

While the knowledge on which this article is based is largely ethnographic, the mode in which I offer it is perhaps more akin to "microhistory," given its focus on an individual's life struggles as a way to understand the working of large historical forces and in its goal of gaining a new view of those forces, "from below" (Levi, 1991; Lüdtke, 1995). According to Sigurôur Gylfi Magnússon,

One of the first tasks facing the microhistorian is to establish the network of links that connect different

structural elements of society and go together to make up the whole that circumscribes the existence of the

individual. From here he [sic] goes on to consider the degree of freedom the individual has to act within

this whole, and finally the tensions that exist between different smaller units (events, phenomena) and that

impinge on his life in one way or another. In this way, the uncertainty each individual has to deal with in

his life becomes an element in the "normative systems" of society and a direct factor in the research.

(Magnússon, 2006, n.p.)

The microhistorian is interested in the tension between human agency and structural determination, between the individual and the social, between historical sedimentation and momentary flux. In this way, the methodological and epistemological concerns of microhistory resonate with developments in the field of anthropology usually glossed as "practice theory" (Ortner, 2006c).[3] Saraswati's life and the stories told about it provide a window into the cultural and historical specificity of millennial modernity.

Saraswati's story is very much structured through the dilemmas of modernity, as they are constructed in a particular historical moment and locale. In the tradition of Lisa Rofel (1999), my approach to modernity is cross-cultural as well as transnational, recognizing at once the global influence of a set of forces – political, economic, technological – that span historically from prior periods of colonization through the current era marked by the decline (but not irrelevance) of the nation-state and the rise of what Arjun Appadurai has called "mediascapes" (Appadurai, 1996); and at the same time, attending to culturally specific and local engagements with such forces, and to the ways in which gender and class, in particular, are implicated. Further, following both Rofel and Appadurai, I am interested in the *imagination*, forged in modernity at local/global nexuses of structural and discursive constraint and opening, where the self becomes a reflexive project of im/possible lives.[4]

Rofel contends that "if one relocates modernity by viewing it from the perspective of those marginalized or excluded from the universalizing center, then it becomes a mutable project developed in unequal cross-cultural dialogues and contentions" (Rofel, 1999, p. 12). Indeed, this unequalness and contention operate not only across cultures and societies but among differentially positioned actors within societies and locals. In this process, gender (as well as class, caste, etc.) functions not only as fraught identification in individual and collective negotiation, but as a discursive plain for the production of knowledge and meaning, as Rofel puts it, "at the heart of modernity's power" (19).

As will become evident in the case that follows, the self (narrativized self-identity), in local contexts of modernity, becomes an everyday, reflexive project "accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities" derived from multiple and contested sources of authority, more and less mediated. Anthony Giddens usefully theorizes the development of a reflexive self in (late) modernity:

> …the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options. Of course there are standardizing influences too – most notably, in the form of commodification….[B]ecause of the 'openness' of social life today, the pluralisation of contexts of action and the diversity of 'authorities', lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily activity. (Giddens, 1991, p. 4-5).

Giddens recognizes that material constraint is as formative a factor as privilege in the construction of lifestyle and that projects of the body play a central role and are one modality in which gender plays a crucial role. In what follows, I attempt to identify some of the contours of a gendered modernity shaped in, and shaping, South Asia at the turn of the millennium.

Meeting Saraswati

I begin Saraswati's story with our initial encounter. In the fall of 1994, I arrived in Janakpur in order to complete my doctoral research and rented a flat in a wealthy family's new home in the outskirts of town, near the small plot of land Saraswati's family had bought to build a house for their own occupation. Bored and brazen, it took Saraswati very little time to find her way along winding and rutted dirt paths to my doorstep, where she demanded (in Nepali) to know what I was doing there and where, in the coming days, she set out to tutor me, not very successfully, in Maithili (which I went on to learn by other means). Our friendship, I believe, proved more of a success. In part, our friendship, for Saraswati, was a way for her to get outside of the confines of her household and her duties there. Indeed, Saraswati was expert at getting out of domestic labor. Whenever I stayed for a meal (in the absence of their parents) Saraswati would slough off her cooking duties onto one of her sisters, proclaiming how much better a cook the sister was (regardless of which sister) than herself.

In 1994, Saraswati was studying for her bachelor's degree, yet she rarely went to class at the local campus, though it was only a five minute walk from her house. Mostly she stayed at home, disdaining the teasing she and the other girls got from male students there. Unlike many other unmarried females of her age whom I experienced to be giggly and shy, Saraswati was smart, surly, insubordinate and generally frustrated. We became fast friends, although I was 10 years her senior and according to local mores of nationality, class, and seniority should have received greater deference from her. (Due to my own mores, the lack of deference was a relief.)

During my doctoral research stint, I spent more time with Saraswati than any other individual in Janakpur – at her home, visiting her family's village, in the streets, and at my apartment trying to learn Maithili or pouring over interview tapes together. In 1994 and 1995, Saraswati was very concerned about how she could continue her studies in the face of the

seeming inevitability of an arranged marriage. She thought perhaps she would like working as a chemist. She discussed with me the possibilities of running away to study or of finding her own husband against her parents' wishes. As we sat together in my flat on numerous occasions, she would weigh her options repeatedly and anxiously, never quite able to reconcile her desires and perceived options for education, career, and marriage.

Following a 15 month stay in Nepal, I returned to the States, where I began work on writing my dissertation. During the first several months of this period, Saraswati and I corresponded by letter (in a mix of Nepali and English). She told me that she had finished her degree and secured a teaching post at a local school; and she remained unsure about her longer-term future. Eventually, our correspondence petered out. Three years after I had left Nepal, after a number of months without communication, I received at letter from Saraswati requesting that I contact the father of a boy she hoped to marry and ask him whether he would consent to arranging a marriage of his son to her. Composing and sending such a letter is very bold and socially dangerous. Customarily, Maithil girls are not to express interest, let alone initiate negotiations, in their own marriage arrangements. If such behavior were discovered, finding a marriage partner might become very difficult indeed for Saraswati. I was surprised, honored, and horrified that Saraswati had chosen me for this task. My stature and my remove from local relations and customs rendered me possibly the only person Saraswati could have called on for such a task. Yet, according to the postmark on the envelope, the letter had taken a whole year to arrive at my door. Given the delay, I dared not respond. (She might, after all, already be married. And what if someone were to intercept the letter?) It was nearly another three years until I saw Saraswati again.

In the summer of 2001, I returned to Janakpur for a visit of several days and upon arrival immediately went in search of my friend, only to find the landscape of my former neighborhood utterly disorienting. A housing boom had taken place in the preceding five or six years, and while the old path no longer existed, a maze of new ruts, winding among the houses, riddled the landscape. In subsequent years, I would come to think of this neighborhood as emblematic of some of the subtle and not-so subtle shifts going on in Nepal. While hundreds of thousands flocked from the far reaches of the countryside into Nepal's capital city of Kathmandu, tens of hundreds, like Saraswati's family, came from surrounding villages to Janakpur in search of education for children, jobs for adult males, and greater access to the material, social and cultural trappings/offerings – the newly imagined lives -- of development and modernization. Such neighborhoods as Saraswati's came to be co-occupied by families whose caste and ethnic identities would have made them strange neighborhood-fellows in their different villages and even regions of origin. Further, even as one is drawn toward Janakpur in pursuit of a more modern lifestyle, one finds oneself very much on the margins – geographically and otherwise – of the "seat" of modernity (Liechty, 2002) – a further displacement. This is a location from which one looks outward, as much as inward, for identification with multiple value systems of sociality.[5]

Even when, that day, my companion and I finally stood in front of Saraswati's house, I was unsure of myself, the bare patio having been supplemented by a garden gate and the mud floors by poured concrete. (These additions are at once an indication of the resources to which Saraswati's family had access and a signal of their alignment with modern middle-class values regarding material life.) Saraswati's youngest sister caught sight of me. Her eyes widened and, exclaiming, she ran inside to retrieve her elders and to fire up the one-burner stove for tea.

While my companion (a language tutor) and I were offered a seat on a raised platform in the front room, excited family members bustled in to greet us.

Last to enter, and then only slowly and without words or affect, was Saraswati -- adorned in the sari, jewelry and *sindur* (streak of red vermillion powder in the part of her hair) of a married woman. Saraswati's demeanor was very strange and uncharacteristic. She appeared listless and unfocused, even upon realization of the arrival of her long-absent friend. Apparently, her family recognized the strangeness of our interaction, as they let me know quietly that she had not been well and was taking anti-depression medication. After a period of pleasantries with the family, Saraswati and I were able to arrange a few moments of privacy, during which I asked her about the letter. I had been waiting for such a moment to explain why I had not fulfilled the request articulated in her letter. Saraswati acted nonplussed by my words. She told me, without evident interest, that she had no idea what I was talking about; that she had written no such letter; that it must have been sent to me from a person other than herself. Taken aback both by her response and by her generally despondent demeanor, I let the subject drop, and departed shortly thereafter.

Two years hence, I returned once again to Nepal, this time for several months of research on Maithil women's storytelling. Not having lived in Janakpur for a number of years, I was eager to reconnect with old acquaintances and again found myself feeling my way toward Saraswati's family home. I was very pleased to learn from her sister that Saraswati had come for a visit from her husband's home in the Indian state of Bihar. At that moment, Saraswati walked into the room with a baby on her hip.

During this visit with Saraswati and her family I spent some time alone with Saraswati in her old bedroom, where we sat on the floor playing with her son. In general, Saraswati seemed

less despondent than the last time I had seen her; we engaged more easily, and she showed clear affection for her son. In the bedroom, I felt we had the privacy for me to ask how things were going. Saraswati's husband was an "engineer," she said, with a decent job. She told me he spoke English. He was coming in a few days to take Saraswati back to their home in Bihar.[6] Though it seemed that the husband and his brothers all had post-secondary educations and were engaged in non-manual labor, Saraswati also informed me that their village home lacked electricity and a phone.

Saraswati told me that things were rather quiet and pleasant at her husband's home. As a new daughter-in-law, she had to care for her husband's aging mother, but Saraswati made a point to tell me that the woman was not particularly demanding and that she had been treating her just fine. While Saraswati indicated a certain contentment about life at her husband's home, she said that she had quite a tale to tell about the difficult course of events that had taken place at her natal home and that had created great suffering (*dukka*) for her. With a glance at the doorway, Saraswati intimated that she would not be able to speak of her dukka here, at her parents' home, the location of her distress, but that I should come to visit her in India, where she could elaborate more freely. Remembering her appearance and demeanor on my previous visit, I was very curious to understand what had happened to her. I told her I would like to come to see her, but that I would have to purchase an Indian visa first, on my next trip to Kathmandu. After another round of tea and snacks, I took my leave, promising to be in touch when I returned from Kathmandu, hopefully with Indian visa in hand. As I made my way toward my bicycle, Saraswati carefully slipped a folded note into my hand.

I read the note as soon as I got sufficiently far away from the house. In it, Saraswati made two requests. She implored me to make a phone call to India asking her husband to send

for her in Janakpur. She wanted him to come as soon as possible to take her home. I would need

to make a call to a shop near her husband's home and ask for his brother to be summoned. In a

method typical of many parts of rural South Asia, where there may be only one or two phones to

a village, the shopkeeper would send for Saraswati's husband's brother. I would need to call

back a few minutes later, giving the brother time to arrive at the shop. I was puzzled as to why

Saraswati had not chosen a member of her natal family to complete this task for her and why she

was keeping it a secret from them. There was, afterall, a working phone line in Saraswati's

house from which calls to India could be made. If she was not able, for reasons of purdah, to

make the call, why couldn't a male member of her natal family make the call at her behest? Why

was she keeping the request a secret from them, as evident from the silent, hidden

communication with me? For what reasons was Saraswati operating underground in her own

natal home? I was also reluctant to make the call, due to possible language barriers and the fact

that I would have to make the call from a public location, thereby exposing Saraswati's business

and my own. But I did it anyway. I was not able to get through to the brother, so I left a

message with the person who answered the phone (having no idea who this was and unsure

whether he knew her husband's family), asking him to pass it along.

The other request Saraswati made in her note to me was for a loan of a few thousand

rupees to pay, she said, for milk for her baby. She promised a gold ring as collateral.

Several days later I received a call from an excited Saraswati, inviting me over to meet

her husband. I was happy at the thought that my message had gotten through to him. I rode my

bike back to their neighborhood the next day, where I was introduced to Saraswati's husband. It

turned out that his English was not quite as good as my Maithili. (Unlike Saraswati, her husband,

who was born and raised in India, did not speak Nepali, with which I was conversationally

fluent. He was conversationally fluent in Maithili, although his first language was Hindi.) That, along with the inevitable discomfort of our relational positions made for a rather awkward, if well-intentioned encounter with strained small talk punctuated by embarrassed laughter. As had Saraswati, her husband also invited me to visit them at his home, and I reiterated my interest in coming once I had gotten my visa. Before I took my leave, Saraswati and I snuck off into her room for a moment. I handed her the loan, folded in a small square and covered in newspaper. She handed me the ring, also wrapped in newspaper, and asked me to take good care of it.

In February of 2004, I returned to Janakpur from Kathmandu, arriving this time with an Indian visa in my passport and ready to set up a visit to Saraswati's marital home. Yet I learned from Saraswati's sister that she was on her way to Janakpur for this sister's wedding, to which I was invited. I showed up for the wedding, but Saraswati did not. I was worried about the gold ring I was holding as collateral for the loan I had secretly made to Saraswati when I met her earlier that fall. The days were getting hotter, and I was rushing to finish up my research.

I returned to my own living quarters one evening to learn that Saraswati's husband had phoned and had said to expect a visit the next day. I hoped very much that Saraswati would be accompanying her husband, since surely they would be staying at Saraswati's *naihar* (natal home). This turned out not to be the case. Only her husband had come and only to see me; he was to return home on the train that same night. In a mix of English and Maithili, I first expressed regret about my failed attempt to visit them. He told me he was prepared to repay the loan and asked after the ring, which I produced. The two items were exchanged. Then he began to speak of the difficulties he, Saraswati, and his family had endured.

After I had first left Janakpur in 1995, he told me, Saraswati, then still unmarried and living with her natal family, had begun teaching at a local school. (I knew this to be true from

the letters I had received from Saraswati during that period.) It was during that time, he said, that her family began to "torture" her (here using the English word). When I puzzled as to why they would do so, he said it was because Saraswati was spending money from her salary on "fashion" (again in English) – cosmetics, clothes and the like. "As we all are aware," he said knowingly, "Saraswati likes to spend money on herself that way."

This much left me disturbed and confused: What did he mean by "torture?" In India and Nepal, the English gloss "torture," in the context of Hindi utterances, for instance, can mean anything from moderate and even amusing difficulty to serious and intense pressure or assault. Given the tone with which Saraswati's husband related this story to me and intimated its negative effects, something of the more serious sort was certainly implied. And then, Saraswati spending money adorning herself? This did not at all match my experience of Saraswati from years past when she and her middle sister Manju seemed to share only about five or six kurtas (long tunics) between them, and when make-up and jewelry, as far as I could tell, were not even within the realm of possibility for them as unmarried girls. And though she had spoken with me of her frustrations and desires regarding family, school, career and marriage, she had not let on about any dreams of consumption. She had, however, accompanied me on some shopping occasions, including visits to the tailor; these were joint forays during which she attached herself to my greater mobility and I attached myself to her greater cultural and linguistic fluency. Further, it was precisely this period, in the mid-1990s, that youthful fashioning began filtering from urban centers in South Asia to more rural outposts such as Janakpur. (More on this below.)

Saraswati's husband continued: He and his family had not known of the punishing maltreatment Saraswati received at the hands of her natal family, nor of its effect on Saraswati, until after the marriage was completed. Only after she moved to their home did it become clear

that Saraswati had a serious psychological disturbance. He indicated that he and his family had spent much effort and money on getting her medical help, including medications. According to her husband, it was only after the birth of their son (whom I calculated must have been conceived about a year into their marriage) that Saraswati had begun to behave like a "normal" (again, English) person again and that he began to think that they might have a "normal" future together.

The birth of a son is considered auspicious and customarily solidifies the place of a wife/daughter-in-law in her conjugal household. One may speculate that the birth of her son contributed to a lifting of Saraswati's spirits and, therefore, to her recovery. It is noteworthy, however, that assistance toward that recovery on the part of her in-laws was forthcoming prior to the birth of her son. Saraswati's husband's story reinforced Saraswati's own assertion that she was content at her husband's home, whither she had secretly wanted to return when I spoke with her, and where, she had indicated, she could tell me of woes of which she could not speak while at her natal home.

Janakpur: Cultural geographics and the global scope of imagination

How might I reconcile the Saraswati I knew in 1994-1995 with the one I encountered several years later, and, further, with the one depicted by her husband in 2004? Nuanced interpretation of the life dilemmas and narrative constructions by and about Saraswati must take into account her cultural and geographical location and their relationship to what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (1993) has called "trans-communal links" with urban, media and technological centers. Thus, my analysis will trace not only the convergences and divergences across cultural imaginations in global context, but the localized multiplicities and contradictions found within them.

Groundings

Janakpur is a commercial town and renowned Hindu pilgrimage site located in the heart of Mithila. The town is located on the Nepal side of the international border (with India) that transects the region of Mithila. Mithila is a primarily rural region characterized by village clusters surrounded by irrigated rice fields and dotted by fish ponds, and is named for the ancient kingdom that is understood to have flourished in its place. Historically, Mithila has more accurately designated a cultural and linguistic region blending into neighboring regions than a definite political or geographical unit (Henry, 1998, p. 415-417; Jain, 1995, 207).[7] Mithila boasts a great literary tradition and is renowned for its part in the Hindu epic Ramayana. According to this epic tale, Sita, daughter of King Janak (after which the town is named) and eventual wife of Rama, was born in Janakpur. Sita and Rama are often considered to be *the* ideal couple in Hinduism – Sita as a model of chasteness and wifely devotion, and Rama as a model of personal integrity (*dhrti*) and fidelity. Each has his/her own temple in Janakpur to which pilgrims flock, and there is a memorial, as well -- complete with larger-than-life mannequins -- depicting their wedding.

According to Richard Burghart, Maithil people have occupied the area for more than one thousand years, and the majority of the population is Maithili-speaking. Since the control of malaria in the 1950s, the district has been increasingly settled by Nepali speakers from the hills, who come to take advantage of the greater supply of fertile land (Burghart, 1988). In the 1960s, when Nepal was administratively reorganized, Janakpur became the Dhanusa district center. Since then, while Maithils remain the numeric majority, non-Maithil Nepalis have transferred to Janakpur to take up government posts there. By the late 1980s, Janakpur was Nepal's second fastest growing town (Burghart, 1988).

Beginning in 1996, internal military strife wracked Nepal. During the time of my most recent field research (2003-2004), Nepal was already embroiled in political turmoil involving a Maoist uprising of several years' duration. Though not a hub of Maoist organizing, perhaps primarily by virtue of its identity as a district center Janakpur saw some Maoist activity, which took the form of extortion of large landowners and detonation of small bombs in the commercial area, under vehicles, and at district government buildings, such as the school district headquarters and the communications tower (knocking out long-distance communication while I was in Janakpur in 2003, for instance). Such activity was matched by increased presence of police and army personnel. It left in its wake an atmosphere of fear – lest one or one's loved ones become collateral damage – and national pessimism among the general population.

I believe such fearful mental states have actually fed a kind of escapist attitude that encourages Janakpur residents and many located elsewhere in Nepal to look outside the country and particularly to the "stable" West for models of the good life. This, in turn, feeds people's interest in the broad range of global commercial culture simultaneously saturating their midst, even as people continue to work the fields manually and hear the ring of bombs exploding in the middle of the night. In late 2006, a peace agreement was signed by the Maoists and political parties. Since then, the formerly militant Maoist party has won a leadership position in parliament, and the monarchy has been abolished. Madeshis, including Maithils, have successfully taken advantage of the moment themselves to begin to gain a much desired foothold in the government from which they have long felt excluded.

Purdah, honor, and kinship in women's lives

Until May 2006, Nepal had officially been a Hindu kingdom, despite the great diversity of religious and cultural variation found among its population. And although Nepal has seen

dramatic formal political reform and subsequent turmoil in the past sixteen years, Hindu, high caste and male citizens are still significantly privileged over their counterparts in myriad formal and informal ways. Some of these privileges, for instance that of inheritance based on gender, have been debated in the courts, and others, especially ethnic and caste privilege, have been fought over in the political, social and military arenas. (The Maoist-led government has promised change in all of these areas.) Directly and indirectly, state-sponsored Hinduism has treated Nepali women as legal and social dependents, sexual threats to patrilineal integrity, and polluting/polluted entities.[8]

Among Maithil people in the Janakpur area, the caste and gender hierarchies I have outlined pre-date the incorporation of Maithil society into the Nepali state and national society, and the two social formations have been mutually reinforcing in some ways. The difference in behavioral expectations and statuses of unmarried and married females is marked on girls' and women's bodies. By tradition unmarried girls are adorned only in very limited ways, and marriage for women is marked by a radical shift in attire (to saris and certain colors associated with sexuality), bejewelment (ideally gold earrings and nose ring; also toe rings, wrist bangles, *tikli/bindis*), and, sometimes, make-up.

Gender constructs in Mithila are especially informed by the constellation of practices call *pardā* (purdah). The *pardā* system in Mithila most affects behavior of and toward recently married women and quite clearly concerns the assurance of appropriation of these women's procreative capacities for their husbands' patrilines. As such, it is especially important to upper castes in the consolidation of their social and spiritual dominance. In its ideal form, it entails the social, verbal and spatial/visual isolation of in-married women from non-household males and from males senior in kinship status to the husbands of those women. These practices,

particularly those involving space, generally do loosen over the years of an individual's married life and especially for those women who successfully produce sons. Poorer, lower caste and less-landed households (commonly overlapping categories) are generally less capable of enacting this ideal (since, among other things, they need women's field labor) than are their high caste and better-off counterparts. As with many disenfranchised groups, lower status Maithils express an ambivalence toward the value of *pardā*, situationally employing and rejecting it. Those of higher social classes are at once more capable of enacting *pardā* and potentially less dependent financially – but not socially -- upon the "chastity" of their women; it is, therefore, difficult to generalize about a direct correlation between social class and *pardā*, and the structural complexity on this count leads to a variety of familial strategies regarding class aspirations.

Pardā in Janakpur (as with purdah elsewhere in South Asia) is intimately linked with the notion of *ijjat*, honor or prestige, an asset that accrues to individuals but especially to whole families, and one that is bound up with caste, community, gender and ethnicity. Maithil women carry special burdens in regard to family honor, burdens that center around sexual propriety and its correlates and are especially acute in the Maithil cultural context. Pramod Mishra (1997) characterizes the situation as follows:

> A man, no matter what he does with his sexuality, remains whole and dynamic, capable of countless renewals, while the woman involved in [elopement across caste and culture] is branded as a "broken egg", forever rotten and polluting…. The metaphor of an egg as a signifier of a high caste Hindu woman, current in Nepali cultural conversation, speaks of the fragile status accorded to a high caste woman in Nepal. And since high caste mores constitute the dominant ideology of the Nepali state, this characterization applies, in various ways, to all Nepali women (the case of the hill tribal [on the one hand] and Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi-speaking Tarai women [on the other] belong to the two extremes of this situation. In the Tarai case, you trample the egg further and finish it, if it breaks….) (345-346)

While the above characterization may seem overly dramatic and ignores the possibility of

resistance and subterfuge, it is certainly the case that the practices of *pardā* in Maithil

communities are meant to safeguard against such breakage.[9]

Practices of *pardā* in the context of patrilineal exogamy across sometimes great

distances, such as in Saraswati's marriage, leave newly married women especially vulnerable in

their marital households and communities. Customarily, a Maithil woman's only "rights" within

her conjugal household -- to sustenance, shelter and life -- are secured through her husband. As

the structurally least enfranchised household members, daughers-in-law often bear the brunt of

stresses and strains among members of their affinal households. They are sometimes

overworked, under-nourished, or subject to physical attack. Such vulnerability is meant to be

mitigated by ongoing connections between married women and their natal families. In this

dynamic, ties to brothers are of enormous import to Maithil women, as to their Hindu and

Hinduized Nepali and Indian counterparts.[10] These ties are subject to multiple ritualizations,

including festivals and particular forms of prestation (Davis, 2005; Raheja & Gold,1994, p. 88-

92).

Emotional closeness between brothers and sisters in childhood, and the role of mediation

and support of brothers for their sisters in adulthood, are idealized.   It is brothers who will

customarily be most responsible for and responsive to the needs of their sisters after those sisters

are married, in cases where their in-laws do not properly attend to those needs, according to

custom.   Virtually all the cases I have heard of brotherly intervention to their sister's relations

with her "in-laws" concerned situations where the sister was not getting (enough) food or shelter,

or had been severely or continually physically abused. In contrast, when visiting her natal home

and village, a married Maithil woman generally experiences greater freedom of movement and

speech and need not cover her head or face (except when, by chance, an individual defined as affinal to her appears). As daughters and sisters, Maithil women returning to their natal homes are beloved guests. Their brothers' wives are expected to feed and otherwise treat them with deference, and their mothers may dote on them while serving as sympathetic sounding boards for stories of the trials they may have encountered as wives and daughters-in-law in their marital households. The woes of life among affines and the idealization of natal relations are the subject of great elaboration in Maithil women's story and song (Davis, 2005 and 2008).

Family strategies: Migration and education

Landholding in the Janakpur area is mixed. In many instances, large estates owned by absentee landlords are cultivated by landless tenants. In other instances, smaller, present landowners enjoy multi-generational labor relations with those who work their land; in yet other cases they work their own land. More and more, access to nonagricultural income (from office work, teaching, army or police service, or various sorts of entrepreneurship, for instance) has become a key marker of difference among farmers. The largest single employer in Janakpur is the Janakpur Cigarette Factory, whose employees are overwhelmingly male. Some young men migrate to Kathmandu, India or elsewhere for work. Cash saved from this work helps underwrite many of the most important markers of the emerging rural middle class, including packaged food and cement or brick (as opposed to mud and thatch) houses, as well as many items that often find their way in to dowry negotiations – such as electronics and motorcycles.

Maithil families are often dispersed residentially in order to maximize their opportunity for collective well-being and advancement. Saraswati's family is not atypical in this regard. During the decade in which I have known Saraswati's family, they have retained land and a house in the village of Saraswati's father's patriline, which is a several-hour bus ride and walk

from Janakpur. While Saraswati's father was employed as a low level civil servant in Janakpur, he also made frequent trips variously with or without his wife, back to the village for days or even weeks at a time to take care of his property interests. By the time the youngest of his children were approaching adolescence, and perhaps before, Saraswati and her four younger siblings (two girls and two boys) were permanently located in a small brick home in Janakpur. This home was constructed on a very small plot carved out of old cow pasture, which over the course of a decade sprouted scores of homes – from thatched roofed "huts" to gated stucco three-story homes with plumbing and electricity. Here in town, Saraswati and her siblings would receive better secondary educations, advantaged by a better selection of schools, by more opportunity to receive tutoring (a common complementary practice to formal schooling), and ultimately by their proximity to the local campus satellite of the government university (Tribhuvan University), where intermediate and bachelor degree programs were available.

In Janakpur, public and especially private schools, many of the latter "English-medium boarding schools," have proliferated. These schools vary widely in quality and cost, and it behooves families aspiring to middle-class status to have a handle on which of the schools are likely to mold their children into English-proficient and employable young adults with the right sort of social capital. A handful of private English-medium schools in Janakpur have such a reputation. Such schools are out of reach for the masses, who struggle to have enough money to buy uniforms and supplies in order to send their children to the "free" government schools that operate officially in the medium of Nepali. While state propaganda continues to promote the schooling of girls alongside boys, for families with limited resources, one locally legitimated choice is to educate sons only, since it is the sons who are significantly more likely to end up in the job market and since unlike daughters, they remain with and are called upon to become

productive (income-generating) members of their patrilines. Once Saraswati's eldest brother had grown beyond useful educational offerings in Janakpur, he gained an opportunity to undertake professional study first in India and then in other Asian countries.

The combined village, town, world economic and social strategy employed by Saraswati's family is in fact typical for those who have started with some resources (in this case arable land), and who, in search of modern lives and class mobility become geographically mobile.   Yet such mobility, on the individual level, has been virtually gender-exclusive: opportunities for education and work abroad have been available primarily to males. Correspondingly, arranged marriages are another means of enacting class aspirations. Families seek sons-in-law with as much formal education and as good a (non-farming) job (or job prospects) as possible, relative to their capacity to provide sizeable dowries. And they seek daughters-in-law who come from families where their male relatives are engaged in such education and employment. The English term "engineer" that Saraswati used to describe the work of her husband and his brothers is employed locally to designate a range of jobs related to public works and technical training. It carries the positive connotation of formal education and non-menial labor. Saraswati's references to the degree of education, ability to speak English, and type of job held by her husband and his brother, as well as her references to the technological status of her marital village, therefore, are implicit – if somewhat contradictory -- communications about the status of the family vis-à-vis local notions of modernity and class.

As the experience of Saraswati and her sisters shows, secondary education and even post-secondary education is becoming increasingly available to girls, as well. Formal education is a key marker of modernity in South Asian discourse and also prime location of the contradictions that discourse creates in girls' and women's lives.[11] The relationships in Janakpur today among

gender, class, caste and education are similar to those in many other parts of South Asia. This

includes the understanding that to educate girls is potentially to raise questions about family

honor in a context of patrilineal descent, patrilocal marriage and male inheritance rights (Gold,

2002). To the extent that formal education for girls requires freedom of movement (minimally to

and from school) and freedom of speech (communication with male peers and teachers), this

central feature of modernity puts the "egg" of female honor – and therefore family honor – at

great risk.[12]

A complex and contradictory relationship exists among understandings of

marriageability, girls' education, dowry requirements, and a family's ability to make ends meet

(cf. Enslin, 1998; Seymour, 2002). The costs to families of educating daughters include

everything from school and tutoring fees, to loss of daughters' domestic and agricultural labor

hours, to loss of marriageability due to questions of family honor and the advanced age of

daughters by the time they have finished schooling, to loss of their expected deference to familial

elders -- the last factor a feared and actual outcome of exposure to new ideas, people and career

options (Dickey, 2002; Seymour, 2002). These must be measured against new forms of social

capital that can attach to formal education – including, contradictorily, *better* marriage prospects

and the potential of higher standard of living for married (and employed) daughters, which may

ultimately also mean greater security for her natal family (Dickey, 2002). The uneven rise in

educational levels of achievement for girls is related in a complex manner to personal and family

class status and mobility, intrafamilial relations of seniority and gender, and values associated

with modernity and development.[13] The fact that Saraswati's parents have educated their

daughters is a signal of their status vis-à-vis local notions of modernity and class. It was a risky

choice that they may have regretted when their eldest daughter, still unmarried, began spending her earnings on herself.

Media flows and local imaginings

The spread of electricity combined with satellite technology and the political ascendancy of global media corporations has ensured that global media is now consumed virtually everywhere. A country whose economy (and, arguably, political viability) relies utterly on foreign aid, Nepal has been steeped in the discourse of development for half a century.[14] In recent years, the discourse of development in Nepal has been partially displaced by (and intertwined with) other discourses of modernity promulgated by electronic media such as film, television, and music recordings. For instance, Laura Ahearn has noted that by the 1990s radio broadcasting in Nepal included programs on "'rural women's development,' romantic songs from Hindi and Nepali movies, and serialized weekly soap operas" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 17).

In Janakpur, posters of film heros and heroines, erotically posed, are sold adjacent to temple offerings, tangerines from southern India, underwear made in China, and brooms of locally produced straw. Visual media in Janakpur and vicinity ranges from Indian soap operas and Nepali sitcoms, to Kung Fu, Nepal state and BBC World news programming, dramatizations of the Ramayana, cooking shows, Holly- and Bollywood classics, and hardcore pornography from all over the world. The latest comer to global media offerings in Janakpur is the internet – completely unavailable to the vast majority, available at home only to the rarest of elites, and available to the growing (but still small) middle class at a handful of "internet cafes" that charge by the hour. Internet cafes in Janakpur are frequented primarily by male youth. Such youth are joined by a smattering of youngish married men, teenage girls (whose very presence there brings their reputations into question), international aid workers and the occasional international tourist.

A perusal of recent web addresses searched illuminates their primary usages: pornography, flirtatious email communications with known and unknown others, email communication with family members abroad, information-gathering on opportunities abroad (schooling, jobs, etc., much of it appearing bogus to this observer), and news/entertainment.

Participation in mass mediated culture is part of what it means to be modern (*adhunik*) in Nepal and is part and parcel of the twin imaginative processes of "self-peripheralization" (ideological conviction that the aspired-to modern is produced elsewhere) and self-incorporation (into the modern) by which participants renegotiate imaginatively and socially their identities and sense of self (Liechty, 2002). This is a world of possible lives, in which, according to Arjun Appadurai, "the search for steady points of reference, as critical life choices are made, can be very difficult," and in which the habitus Bourdieu theorized as the reproductive force of culture is at least partially replaced by "conscious choice, justification, and representation" (1996, p. 43; see also Brechenridge, 1995). Here Appadurai represents the historical shift toward choice in overly stark terms, perhaps (Rofel, 1999, p. 287). In fact what he is identifying is a change, albeit a rather profound one, in the material and ideological *balance* between the two. In this renegotiation, the loss of steady points of reference for South Asian women is especially profound. As Shoma Munshi argues, in the Asian context, while a "discursive ideological space for identification" has been created by through global mediation, this figure competes with many other social forces for space in female imagination. Indeed, the exact contours of the "Asian modern woman" are "constantly being localized to provide a hybrid female figure (Munshi, 2001, p. 12). The balance of the (twin) processes of self-peripheralization and self-incorporation delineated by Liechty leads to a sense of deprivation – distance from possible lives – all the more

magnified in Janakpur relative to Nepal's capital city, and in particular ways for Maithil girls and women in comparison to their menfolk, as I will delineate below.

Discussion: Im/possible lives

The remainder of this essay entails a discussion of three interrelated theoretical concerns. First, I explore the relationship between Saraswati's life dilemmas and behaviors, on the one hand, and the discursive configurations of gender, class, and modernity in contemporary Mithila, on the other, with a particular focus on fashion and youth. Second, I trace Saraswati's choice of particular forms of speech and silence at a number of key moments in her negotiation of the road toward a gendered and classed adulthood, arguing that both speech and silence may be articulate forms of constrained agency in given moments. Finally, I suggest the emergence of a shift in Maithil society in the balance of solidarity with newly married women from their natal families to their affinal relations. While all three of these issues are intertwined, I attempt here, for analytical purposes, to tease them apart. Taken together, the concerns raised in this section provoke questions about the relationship between the imaginable and the possible for the lives of young women in contemporary South Asia.

Dangerous birds: Youthful fashionings

The mass mediation of global popular culture has helped construct new identities in Nepal. The concept of 'youth' in contemporary Nepal as elsewhere in the region has been carved out in the period between childhood and marriage that has emerged as the result of an increase in middle-class educational expectations combined with a shortage of employment deemed suitable to this class, as well as the influence of new media and commercial forces. In Janakpur, problems of access to youth culture go beyond the dilemma of socio-economic means to questions of local market and peer social space availability. Compared with the youth scene

in Kathmandu described by Mark Liechty (2002), in Janakpur, to the extent that youth culture operates, it is significantly more gender exclusive. There are far fewer youthful "spaces" of modernity in Janakpur than in Kathmandu – spaces such as restaurants, bars, cafes, sports clubs, almost all of which, in any case, are male-dominated – hair salons being one exception (Thompson, 1997). In Janakpur, boys congregate in soccer and cricket fields, cinema halls, gyms, and internet cafes, as well as by simply roaming around town in groups. The vast majority of Janakpur's girls are excluded from all of these activities and venues, except under strict conditions of chaperoning. For example, an adolescent girl I am sponsoring to go to school in Janakpur is not permitted to go to an internet café to send me emailed updates on how she is doing (which I had requested). Her parents are not even willing for her to go there with an appropriate family chaperone for fear of how such behavior might reflect on the family and affect her chances later for a suitable marriage. This girl is permitted to go to school, but she must come straight home without speaking with anyone, immediately change out of her school uniform and begin household chores, which will keep her busy through the evening. Her access to global popular culture comes primarily through visual media at home – especially television and film star posters. Her ability to engage in localized construction of popular culture with peers is severely constrained. A teenage son in this same family, also in school, is subject to no such restriction and far less accountability for his movement, time and household labor.

As this example illustrates, following the principle of *ijjat*, girls in Janakpur are generally more cloistered than boys and made to keep busy with household labor. For families striving for middle-class status, there is generally less concern than among their urban counterparts with the values of mass culture and more pre-occupation with traditional concerns of *ijjat*, good marriage matches, and exchange and storage of wealth in non-ephemeral assets. Here the difference with

Kathmandu and other South Asian urban settings is a matter of degree: in Janakpur youth culture is less developed generally *and* more exclusively male. Despite the longings created in encounter with mass media, then, youth, especially female youth, in Janakpur have significantly less access to the fulfillment of modern dreams, and they are correspondingly less articulate about those dreams, which conflict with others held by them or for them by their families.

Given the constraints placed on female (wanna-be) Janakpur youth such as Saraswati, how do young women there strive for modern lives? As in many locations around the world, in Janakpur, girls and women's bodies in particular become the turf of collective, as well as individual struggles to gain a footing in the shifting terrains of nation, class and gender. A primary location for the play of imagination and the stress of modern (im)possibilities is the female body, and this is where the question of fashion enters the picture. In Janakpur as elsewhere, the consumption and display of *fashion* is one critical strategy of identification with modernity and its class aspirations. This is the case in particular ways for youth, and in even more particular ways for female youth.

Much of the accelerated attention to fashion among South Asian women is connected to an explosion of multinational cosmetic, fashion and consumer industries, especially hygiene, household products, cookware, and soft drinks in the early 1990s (Parameswaran, 2001, p. 77) and to the construction of the figure of a "New Indian Woman" as part of this project. Drawing on the work of Shoma Munshi (1998), Parameswaran describes this figure of the "New Indian Woman" as incorporating "accommodationist forms of resistance to traditional patriarchy" and as "free, individualized agents who as wives, mothers and daughters-in-law can control, manage, and manipulate patriarchy through clever and educated forms of consumption" (97). In the case of South Asian modernity, femininity, and fashion, we have two closely related but not identical

trends, corresponding, ultimately, to two, also related but not identical, forms of patriarchy. The

first is what Parameswaran refers to as traditional patriarchy – the patriarchy of the South Asian

(and particularly Hindu) family (Parameswaran, 2001). In this case women have always worked

to manage and mitigate this patriarchy. Consumption in a modern mode represents a new and

intensive form of such manipulation, enacted by women precisely as wives, mothers, etc., but

through an individualist ideology whereby one may embrace these roles and still be an individual

(but still primarily familial) self enacted through consumption.

The second discursive trend in modern feminine identity in South Asia positions women

and girls not as family members but as national and global citizens (albeit gendered ones), whose

identities are constructed from the themes and tropes of popular (global, regional, national)

culture and infused with class aspirations connected with occupation, consumption, and supra-

local knowledge. Here the patriarchal tropes are those inflected through class, romance, and

violence. The latter trend, I would argue, is the stronger of the two in Janakpur -- given its still

proportionally high rural, land-based population and therefore proportionally smaller modern

middle class, and given that the vast majority of Maithil women born before the 1990s came of

age without access to mass media or formal education. What I am suggesting is that very few

Maithil women whose families have the financial means actually have the *social* means

(mobility, access to markets, social intercourse, etc.) to enact the New Indian Woman (even if

they encounter this image on television each day).

In Janakpur, it is the other, less familial, more youth-oriented version of modern

femininity -- which centers on consumption of *personal* (vs. household) items -- that is the

stronger impulse. This impulse requires what is increasingly available to some: free time for

adolescent and post-adolescent unmarried girls, small but identity-significant consumer items

(jewelry, clothing, music cassettes, posters, etc.), spaces for youth to mingle out of the supervision of adults and most especially independently of familial seniors (e.g., on the way to school). As an example, a girl might be told by her mother to buy a kilo each of bananas and oranges on her way home from school one day. With the change she has left over, she might also purchase a pair of plastic barrettes from a petty street vendor (unfamiliar to her family). Back at home, she may lie about the price of the fruit and tell her mother that a school friend gave her the barrettes. Later, she might try out some of the dance moves of the "heroines" she's seen on TV, when a song from one of her movies comes on the radio. Scenarios such as this one are a very common means by which a girl in Janakpur might act on her fantasies of youthful consumption and identification.

Yet, in Janakpur and surrounding areas, even with the emergence of youth culture, it appears to me that sumptuary regimes at the turn of the millennium are still very much intact, and that regimes of fashion exist only tentatively alongside and in uneasy and evolving relation to older practices of body adornment (described above) and female constraint. New adornment (especially self-chosen adornment) practices on the part of *unmarried* girls – a set of practices encouraged by the discourses of modernity promoted by commercial agents -- signal non-patrilineally and patriarchally controlled sexuality that is, under the old sumptuary regime, distinctly inappropriate and dangerous. Class politics in South Asia are steeped in patrilineal formations – even as these formations are challenged by certain global cultural trends; and it is for this reason that individualized choice (however overdetermined by popular culture) on the part of girls to adorn themselves threatens the class status of their families. Girls and boys, young women and men, carve out selves in these rough waters, forging compromises between the scope of the imagination and the scope of their material resources and social options. Girls, in

particular, may sense that the window of opportunity for self-fashioning is temporally limited to the ever-extending life stage of youth – a stage that often ends abruptly in coincidence with the end of schooling and through the practice of arranged marriage. For Saraswati, a temporal space existed between the end of schooling and her arranged marriage, and it was at that moment in her life trajectory -- buttressed by generation of her own income and increased physical mobility, both made possible through her teaching job – that she apparently took to "doing fashion" (fashion *karal chhai*).

Despite pressures in the direction of individualism (and individualistic consumption) that result in part from the shift from family farming to individual money-making, however, class status and class mobility is generally still a *familial* project in the Janakpur context (as throughout much of South Asia), enacted through family level decisions about individual family members regarding education, labor, consumption, money loans, marriage, housing, etc. (cf. Dickey, 2002). According to Arjun Appadurai (1996), "[w]omen in particular bear the brunt" of the frictions and traumas of deterritorialization as they hit the family, "for they become pawns in the heritage politics of the household and are often subject to the abuse and violence of men who are themselves torn about the relation between heritage and opportunity in shifting spatial and political formations" (44). As I have indicated, women in Maithil society have long been household "pawns" (though not agentless ones), in the sense that the honor of the family weighs heavily on their shoulders. Now with the intensification of migration and the mediation of life possibilities, there are all sorts of "heritage vs. opportunity" tensions – for instance regarding decisions about which brothers stay on in the village and live agrarian lives, and which brothers/husbands/sons are sent or venture out in search of employment in towns, cities or abroad, and then whether they continue to visit and financially support and participate in

important events with family members or break traditions and obligations of various sorts. In this dynamic, girls and women generally have fewer opportunities and become the site of pressures to maintain heritage in the midst of the shake-up. Thus, when they "step out" collectively or individually, it can be particularly threatening. So, one may well imagine the treatment meted out to Saraswati by her natal familial authorities of which she could not, in the space of her natal home, speak, and that her husband glossed as "torture", would have been largely a result of these pressures. As a junior and female family member, Saraswati's independent decision-making and individualistic orientation toward her present and future threaten her family's efforts to maximize their class potential, present and future.

Indeed, middle-class women find themselves negotiating the imperative to "fashion" themselves in modernity, at the same time, they bear the stigma of immorality, should they take this fashioning too far or perform it in the wrong contexts (cf. Liechty, 1996, p. 203).[15] Those who go too far are *chārā*. Young women who are seen to wear too much makeup and Western-derived revealing attire, or who hang out in venues of globalized popular culture – tourist areas, bars, cinema halls and the like – are called *chārā*. Birds. The reference conjures a sense of pretty but dangerous things "flitting" about outside the bounds of social control and with disregard to social norms and standard authority (Liechty, 2003, p. 72). In fact, of course, such behavior is not unstructured but rather subject to a different and perhaps less stable set of controls and very much in response to the tropes and values of a different, contextually esteemed, imagined Other.

At the millenium's turn, Saraswati became one who flew beyond the family compound – in her case by becoming a teacher and one who presumed to fend for herself, and, according to her husband, by using her salary for purposes of self-adornment. As an aspiring (female)

professional, she may well have felt not only deserving of but compelled to consume by spending from her earnings (cf. Dickey, 2002). Living as she did in tight quarters and without privacy in her natal familial home, she would have been hard pressed to purchase any material item besides fashion that would not become the joint property of her household (e.g., a radio). In doing fashion, Saraswati appears to have enacted an individualistic strategy of modern identification.[16]

Speech and silence

Over the years and in multiple and complex contexts, Saraswati has demonstrated both the impulse to tell her story and the impulse to remain silent, even to refuse the notion that she has a story to tell (i.e., in regard to the matchmaking letter). I am convinced that these varied stances together constitute a tactical response to the vagaries and contradictions of the possible and impossible worlds of modernity that she has encountered. In much of feminist scholarship, emphasis lies on "giving voice" to women (literally) and to women's experiences and perspectives (figuratively), under the premise that women's voices (knowledge, perspectives, practices, etc.) have been ignored and/or suppressed. Susan Gal has argued that in such scholarship, "silence is generally deplored, because it is taken to be a result and a symbol of passivity and powerlessness" (1991, p. 175; see also Visweswaran, 1994, p. 68-69.) Those with a more Foucaultian orientation, in which the coercions of speech and disclosure (as in confession, psychotherapy, welfare interviews, etc.) are examined, on the other hand, have demonstrated how silence can be at once a tactic of the powerful and a strategic defense against them (Gal, 1991, p. 175; see also Meyer, 2000; Visweswaran, 1994). Gal points out that "silence, like any linguistic form, gains different meanings and has different material effects within specific institutional and cultural contexts. Silence and inarticulateness are not, in

themselves, necessarily signs of powerlessness" (176).   Furthermore, women may produce

cultural "commentary" – gesture, ritual, or, in this case fashion – that is not, strictly, linguistic at

all. Indeed, as Kamala Visweswaran has put it, "If we do not know how to 'hear' silence, we

cannot apprehend what is being spoken, how speech is framed" (1994, p. 51).

Women's speech and silence in Mithila must be viewed, in part, through the prism of

pardā, discussed above. While traditionally the silencing of a new daughter-in-law in her

husband's extended household is most prominent, the silencing of Maithil girls and women takes

many forms in contemporary contexts. It has been treated, for instance, as the only appropriate

response to "eve teasing" (cf. Liechty, 1996, p. 221-223).

In conjunction with particular overt constraints on Maithil women's direct speech in and

outside of their households, and as a possible result of the degree of separation and difference

between male and female life experiences, Maithil women have developed a number of

expressive traditions that offer insights into their preoccupations, perspectives, and values, and

into the micro-politics of their lives (Brown, 1996; Davis, 2005 and 2008). A large literature has

arisen in the last two decades on South Asian women's expressive traditions, including song,

story, art and ritual. While some of this work focuses primarily on the ways dominant

(patriarchal) forms and understandings of femininity are reinforced through women's ritual and

religious lives (e.g., Leslie, 1989, 1991) -- even with "small deviations" (Leslie 1991, p. 3), and

in self-serving ways (Pearson, 1996) -- much of the current literature stresses that South Asian

women's verbal arts constitute powerful alternative and sometimes counter-hegemonic forms of

discourse in a field of competing discourses and across a variety of contexts.[17]

I have already indicated that South Asian youth may seek to attach themselves to "things

modern" (such as fashion) in order to effect particular identities (or self-representations).

Another such "thing" entering the field of vision of particular youth may be the ethnographer herself. Enacting our relationships at the nexus of webs of complex signification and flows of power, South Asian youth and anthropologists sometimes become each others' interlocutors. Given the confessional position frequently assumed by ethnographers (Rosaldo, 1989; Visweswaran, 1994) and assumptions our interlocutors may have about our values and practices in regard to education, career, marriage and sexuality, it is no wonder that some young South Asians, particularly those relatively isolated from youth peer cultures, seek out visiting researchers for laden discussion of these topics, enacting thereby particular self-representations not practicable in other contexts or with other interlocutors (cf. Ewing, 1990). Such may be the mode in which Saraswati spoke to me in 1994-1995 of her dilemmas regarding education, career, and marriage. (Recall that Saraswati took advantage of my mobility and differently constrained possibilities of speech to speak for her in a phone call to her husband. Were her relations with her natal family not so strained, she might have asked a brother to complete this task for her.)

Letter writing is a further contemporary vehicle for expression utilized by rural South Asian girls, and one not available in many cases to their mothers -- for at the most basic level, this practice requires literacy. The articulation of romantic or marital desire in the form of letters constitutes an additional new venue for Maithil women's speech and silence. As Laura Ahearn has demonstrated, following the rise in formal education and literacy among girls in the village of "Junigau" in the central western hills of Nepal, love letters have become a medium for courtship behavior leading, sometimes, to "love marriage" (Ahearn, 2001). To date, I am not aware of such a practice of love letters in Janakpur. Even as the practice is spread through much of South Asia, I believe it remains too risky in Mithila, whose ideological and practical constraints on girls and women (especially in regard to sexuality) are particularly intense. The

advantage of letter-writing is that (unless intercepted) letters afford new sorts of privacy between individuals and that letters move across space when people cannot. Saraswati engaged me in a twist on this practice by sending a letter imploring me to assist her in setting up a non-conventionally arranged marriage on her part. Just as in love letter writing in Junigau, in Saraswati's letter, she spoke of things that she could not have articulated aloud. While, according to Ahearn, long-married couples in Junigau indicated shyness to speak of the things they wrote in their letters even decades later, Saraswati chose not even to acknowledge the existence of the letter itself upon my later inquiry. She did, however, use the vehicle of written communication with me again, later, when she asked me to phone her husband's brother to have him send the message to her husband that she wished him to come to Janakpur to take her back with him. Again, in that context, she could not speak these words – she could not articulate this desire -- aloud.

How might I account more subtly for Saraswati's disavowal of the matchmaking letter I received? I do not believe that her disavowal, in the face of my inquiry, is the result of her having, in fact, not written the letter. Afterall, I was able to identify it as her handwriting, having also received other letters from her. I do not believe that she forgot or permanently repressed the memory, nor was she refusing in general to occupy the subject position such an admission might put her in vis-à-vis me, as her inquisitor. Instead, Saraswati's denial appears to me now as a creative solution: she needed situationally to veil a particular modern, youthful self-representation-in-process that she had not been able to sustain and that she could not perform at the same time she enacted the role of the bride in a marriage arranged by those surrounding her in her natal home – the very same people whose treatment of her, I would later gather from her intimations as well as those of her husband, helped mold her into the shape she then went on to

embody. Saraswati's matchmaking letter-writing self could not, I am suggesting, be made on that context to cohere with a self with characteristics permitting her to function in the roles she found herself in as wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Yet, the fact that Saraswati intimated later that she was prepared to tell me her story of suffering, given the appropriate telling context, indicates that the situationally inarticulable self-representation wasn't destroyed; it may have been displaced, or even safeguarded, for another hoped-for moment when storytelling would be possible in a different possible world (cf. Gold, 1994).[18]

Affinal solidarity

In regard to the politics of speech and silence, it is of note that while intimations of suffering at her natal home were made by Saraswati herself, the more direct verbal accusation regarding the culpability of her natal family came to me via Saraswati's *husband*. It was he who explicitly broached the topic with me; he into whose patriline her son was born and the person, according to his narrative, whose family paid for all of her medical bills, expenses that according to him were to help her therapeutically deal with the mental breakdown that came from being, as he put it, 'tortured' by her natal family.   He situates his family as her ally vis-à-vis her abusive family of origin. Similarly, Saraswati indicated a more expansive capacity to speak in her affinal, than in her natal, home.

These are not the narratives one expects. In his study of Indian folktales, A.K. Ramanujan observed that in contrast to tales featuring male protagonists for whom marriage signals an end to suffering (and to the story), in women's tales involving female protagonists, plots are launched with the suffering of women that *begins* with marriage (Ramanujan, 1991). Indeed, Maithil women have shared with me a plethora of real-life tales where this has been the case.   As I indicated earlier, anyone familiar with Maithil village gossip and standard news fare

has heard again and again the narrative of the new bride sent packing back to her natal home (worse yet, physically assaulted) either because of shortcomings undisclosed to her marital family at the time the marriage was arranged (be she lame, barren, or dark-skinned) or because of dowry exigencies not met. It would not have been surprising if Saraswati's husband and his family, upon learning of her "mental illness," had rejected Saraswati and come into heated conflict with her natal family. Clearly, Saraswati shared with members of her husband's family her story of suffering in her natal home. She was not silent as a bride. In this way, Saraswati managed to flip the exigencies of speech and silence in relation to her natal and affinal relations.

What might we learn about Saraswati's treatment by her marital family from treating mental illness as a social construct and one with particular resonance in modernity? The social functions of Saraswati's "mental illness" may be illuminated by Alfred Pach's account of two cases of "madness" in Nepal (Pach 1998, 111-128). In both of the cases examined by Pach, each of which revolves in part on questions of the distribution of household income and labor, "[w]hen sufferers exhibited disturbed behavior, household and kin conflicts surfaced and provided the social and referential context for interpretations of the behavior, its cause, and cure" (114). As do people in Mithila, elsewhere in Nepal Pach's informants identified as explanations for madness witchcraft and spirit attack stemming from interpersonal conflicts (cf. Ong 1987). Frustration over such conflicts (or personal loss) and emotional shock were also understood by his informants to cause of mental illness (115). Drawing on the related cultural framework extant in Mithila, it would not have been a stretch for Saraswati's husband and his family to imagine that Saraswati's "illness" (behavioral/symptomatic presentation) was the result of "torture" she experienced in conflict with her family over the disposal of her income.

In contrast to Saraswati's situation, both of the cases reviewed by Pach involved men. In these cases, the available community/family choice as to how to respond was either to find ways to incorporate the subjects productively into the households or to send them away for treatment (and thus get them out of the village). The latter choice (removing people from their communities) is a particularly modern solution, corresponding with the (Western) "classic" approach to madness -- the development of asylums for the containment of those whose behavior disturbed the functioning and ideologies of early modern Europe -- sketched historically by Michel Foucault in Madness and Civilization (2001 [1961]).[19]

In the cultural (including gendered) context in which Saraswati found herself, an alternative to banishment to the asylum was marriage (cf. Lamb 2000). In this exogamous, patrilocal society, where marriages can take place across great distances, marriage can be one effective way to pass the buck, as it were, 'the buck' in such cases being mentally ill, mentally or physically "deficient," or behaviorally problematic girls. Natal families negotiating marriages for sons and daughters who have socially significant physical or mental "deficits," sometimes fail to disclose the same – a tactic made possible by the fact that marriage negotiations often happen without the negotiating parties ever meeting the potential bride or groom in question. Saraswati's husband's home lay a full day's travel away, in another country; Saraswati and her eventual husband stayed put while their seniors arranged their marriage. In Saraswati's case it appears also to have been "those in positions of power who defined and legitimized the social spaces and possibilities for the afflicted individuals" (Pach 1998, 124). Saraswati's husband's family eschewed the "classic" approach (banishment) to her mental illness (in which case they might have returned her to her natal family, calling off the wedding if it were not yet complete), opting instead for modern psycho-pharmaceutical cure/management. The success of this

treatment was measured by the normalization of Saraswati; her cure was equated with her ability to fulfill her moral duty (dharma) as wife and mother. (Especially normative was her achieved status as mother of a son.)

Certainly, discursive and practical tension between the extended family and the married or non-married, romantic hetero-couple is a central dynamic of modern South Asian life. Susan Seymour has examined a number of longitudinal studies on family and gender systems in different parts of India, remarking that as a whole they indicate changes that include "the loosening of familial bonds of authority based upon age and gender hierarchies in favor of increased husband-wife intimacy and the relaxation of purdah restriction on women" (Seymour, 2002, p. 115). Yet such loosenings are by no means simple in their motivations, unidirectional in their results, or unresisted; and tensions between nuclear and extended family continue to loom large discursively and in practice (Dickey, 1995; Uberoi, 2001).

Regarding "love marriages," by which I mean here marriages arranged primarily by the two people in question and socially acknowledged as such, I have heard of only three in the Janakpur area; in each case, at least one member of the couple was not Maithil. I have come across no cases of acknowledged love marriage between Maithils. Arranged marriages across families whose resources are shared (however unequally) fraternally and across multiple generations, being passed down patrilineally, remain pivotal to social organization in Mithila.

At least so far, a shift toward love marriage in this sense has not been a significant response to the pressures and possibilities of modernity and class striving among Janakpur area Maithils. Saraswati's story may point to a different and potentially more tenable shift in family politics as a response to class strivings among Maithils, given the continued importance of arranged marriage to social organization. While Saraswati's story may be an anomaly, it may

also point to a destabilization of old schemes of kin solidarity, and an emergent but not (yet) restabilized balance thereof, a shift in structures of feeling about sisters/daughters from the natal family standpoint and wives/daughters-in-law from the affinal family standpoint.

With the phrase "structures of feeling," Raymond Williams seeks to capture a moment in social and cultural life when relatively fixed forms are on the verge of change but have not yet re-solidified, are "in solution" (as opposed to "precipitated"). In such moments, according to Williams (1977), we are examining a social experience which is still in *process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies.[20] These are often more recognizable at a later stage, when they have been (as often happens) formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations (132). (Even at this later stage, of course, such formations are in process, but here we are talking about patterned, as opposed to idiosyncratic developments.)

What might be the elements of such a "solution" for the case at hand? Certainly, there is the persistence of the importance of arranged marriages among Maithil patrilines. Another key ingredient is the rise in girls' educational attainments and consumption of popular culture, and corresponding rise in girls' expectations for possible worlds regarding such concerns as work, mobility, speech, and fashion. At the nexus of these elements is the stress on families seeking middle class status and the partial displacement of that stress onto the backs of daughters through deployment of ideologies of *ijjat*. The same pressures may lead girls to desire to escape their natal families, if not through romantic love self-chosen then possibly into the bosom of husbands' families whose shifting sensibilities may allow for more open expression on the part of new brides. As late capitalist pressures encourage middle-class hopefuls to expand from

landed economy to professional jobs as an avenue forward and upward, educated, in-married women may become desirable not only for their reproductive capacities and (more broadly) household and agricultural labor but as socializers of the next generation of the modern middle-class and even themselves as non-manual economic contributors in their affinal households. Also potentially dislodged in this swirl of elements-in-solution is the ideology under which natal families remain safe harbors for married women, while their marital homes and affinal relations are associated with intense subordination and the potential for abuse. Thus while one important shift in modern life already noted in the literature is toward the hetero-couple, another less explored possibility is a certain reversal in the affiliative meanings of natal home (*naihar*) and marital home (*ghar*) for married women. Saraswati's story lends insight into how such possibility may develop in the context of particular (localized) class interests. Only time and further research will tell the shape of the precipitate that eventually (but again only temporarily) crystallizes out of this flux.

Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, the tensions between the family group and the individual, and between old and new consumptive practices, are central to the conflicts between Saraswati and her family that appear to contribute to her pre-marital suffering and subsequent difficult relations she experiences, as a married woman, with her natal family – the very people upon whom, according to a long-standing cultural script, she ought to be able to depend should she be maltreated at the hands of her in-laws, into whose home she transferred upon marriage. In fact, the story Saraswati and her husband tell is one that reverses this script: she is nurtured back to health by her in-law family and calls upon her husband (whereas traditionally it should be her brother [Davis, 2005]) to rescue her from maltreatment in her natal (it should be marital) family.

Reports of affinal solidarity are what part of what makes this tale modern in a particular cultural sense, even as it draws deeply on long-standing collective tropes and narratives. Thus, I suggest that Saraswati's is, indeed, a modern tale -- one inflected with middle-class aspirations differentially enacted by Saraswati and her natal kin in a way that places them at loggerheads. As I hope I have demonstrated, this eventuality is the almost inevitable result of the contradictions girls and women experience as embodied persons in South Asia. Such contradictions may be particularly acute in those locations – geographical, social, technological -- neither strongly isolated from globalizing forces nor from which access to and integration into them is a foregone conclusion. Janakpur is just such a location, as is its marginally middle-class sector in which Saraswati's family finds itself.

There is no doubt that Saraswati has suffered, even as she spoke and withheld speaking in multiple registers and contexts. First, she spoke to me, scheming, weighing, trying on imagined selves. Following my departure, she sought to establish and present a self through self-assertion, through moving outward, teaching, consuming, self-adorning. As a consequence, it seems, she was punished, pushed into a new silence and particular self-negation. And in this silence she could not utter words to speak of earlier speech/writing, to speak of that earlier time of self-fashioning. Yet her story lay dormant.[21] Through a twist of fate not unrelated to shifts in forces – cultural, social and economic – beyond her own making and beyond but mediated within her own community, Saraswati found in her arranged marriage an acquired family willing to invest in her rehabilitation and normalization. By the time I re-emerged in her life, she appeared ready to tell me her story, only she could not speak from her geo-social location as daughter; rather only from that of wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. As a man and as her spouse, Saraswati's husband could bridge that space for her and speak for her (and no doubt for himself) to me; but

to hear from her directly, in order for her to do more of the telling, I would have to expend time, money, and trouble getting to her, across national, linguistic, and gendered borders. I have dallied; Saraswati waits still for that next moment of telling.

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[1] A pseudonym, as is that of her sister, "Manju." I am deeply indebted to Saraswati for her many forms friendship and assistance.

[2] In using the phrase "structures of feeling," I am, of course, drawing on the work of Raymond Williams (1977). With this phrase, Williams seeks to capture moments when relatively fixed social and cultural forms are on the cusp of change but have not yet re-formed. In such moments the tension between received interpretation and practical experience is often characterized by "an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency" (130).

[3] Risk is entailed in drawing heavily on the life struggles and interpretations of limited numbers of persons, as I have done here, to make assertions about larger cultural trends. One is compelled to expand the substantiation of one's assertions by drawing the reader's attention to corroborating ethnographic information and relevant literature. I have attempted to do throughout the article. In addition to the literatures with which I presently engage, my arguments are supported by 15 months of ethnographic research conducted in 1994-1995 and 6 months of ethnographic research conducted in 2003-2004 and by two shorter visits to the "field." During these research stints, I engaged in many informal conversations with girls and women, whose lives and words indirectly support my interpretation of the account of one life highlighted here. Still, the conclusions of this article must be considered suggestive.

[4] Rofel criticizes those who have developed an "anthropology of modernity" that proclaims or assumes homogeneity of effect, arguing that "modernity at its heart is about cultural difference" and inequality. Here she expresses a concern that Appadurai's emphasis on mass media, diaspora, and the recentness of imagination unwittingly leads him in the direction of homogenization, despite his statements to the contrary (Rofel, 1999, p. 287).

[5] See Appadurai (1996) on the distinction between "neighborhood" and "locality."

[6] Marriage across the international border and across "mother tongue", especially for Brahmans in this region, is neither unusual nor new. Even given the contemporary political contexts of both Nepal and India, concerns of caste and class appear more salient than national identity in forming family alliances through marriage.

[7] The Mithila region is generally understood by historians and linguists to extend to the Himalaya foothills to the north, Ganges river to the south, the Gandaki and Kosi rivers to the west and east, respectively (Burghart, 1993; Grierson, 1881).

[8] On the complex structural positioning of Hindu women vis-à-vis issues of purity, see, for instance, Bennett, 1981; Carman & Marglin,1985.

[9] While Maithil Brahman males sometimes refer to *pardā* as a valued marker of Maithil culture that distinguishes them from and makes them superior to their *pahāDi* (hill) counterparts in Nepal, whose cultural traditions they describe as "broken" (*bigral*), popular media and development discourse, including feminist-inflected media and development discourse, tends to characterize Nepali Hindu culture and society, and Maithil culture and society especially, as particularly oppressive to women (Acharya, 1981; Acharya & Bennett, 1981). Both Brahmanic and (women's) developmentalist kinds of portrayals have functioned historically to cloak the existence of other views and practices, such as the strategic behavior of women, culturally and socially specific contradictions and tensions in the gender order, alternative extant gender practices and cultural constructions, non-patriarchal axes of domination, and non-patrilineal solidarities such as those among related and non-related females and among cross-sex siblings (e.g., Davis, 2005; Nuckolls, 1993; Peterson, 1988; Raheja & Gold ,1994; Seymour, 1993). In any case, one does well to bear in mind that South Asian women confront *pardā* as agentive albeit constrained subjects and that it "is not a monolithic prison but a subtle, fluid, and often highly manipulable bundle of practices and precepts" (Raheja & Gold, 1994, p. 169). This complexity has deep historical roots that are bearing new fruit in the modern context. As I have argued elsewhere (Davis, 2005), attention to the practices and story of the Maithil festival, *Sāmā Cakevā*, can help widen the view

of Maithil undersandings of gender and culture by revealing some of these other perspectives and practices submerged in Maithil Brahman, masculinist and development discourses.

[10] For discussions on brother-sister relations in South Asia, see Bennett, 1983; Lamb, 2000; Nuckolls, 1993; Peterson, 1988; Seymour, 1993, p. 47-9; Trawick, 1990, p. 170-8; Wadley, 1976 and 1994, p. 43-5 and 57.

[11] For discussions of such contradictions in a variety of settings, see Ahearn, 2001; Dickey, 2002; Gold, 2002; Liechty, 1996 and 2003; Seymour, 2002.

[12] Like the gender-inflected decision-making on the part of family leaders regarding schooling, cross-gender peer relations among schoolmates reflect the discursive and structural contradictions of rural South Asia. This is perhaps nowhere more the case than with "eve teasing." Eve teasing is a practice now ubiquitous in Janakpur (and elsewhere) whereby male youth harass girls and young (unmarried) women by calling them names, singing romantic/sexually charged Hindi film song fragments to them, and/or groping them – often as they walk to and from school or college campus. It is instructive to note that such practices are rare in village settings where each child or youth is known as part of deeply intertwined family units. The practice can only flourish in settings with some anonymity, so that even if reprimanded a boy's family may never find out nor be answerable for his offensive behavior. In part as a result of eve teasing, girls rarely walk alone to school or campus and sometimes stay home (missing school) in order to avoid this sort of harassment, which – based on the *ijjat* principle of the broken egg – can affect their own reputations much more than those of the perpetrators. Saraswati was one of those girls who attempted to avoid eve teasing by staying away from campus.

[13] Just *what* young people learn in school is another question beyond the scope of but not irrelevant to the present discussion, although few scholars have systematically examined this question (Ahearn, 2001 p. 152-171; Phnuyal, 1997, p. 311). For additional studies of family, gender, education and change in South Asia, see Abraham & Lal, 1995; Hancock, 1999; Kumar, 2000; Minturn, 1993; Wadley, 1994.

[14] For discussions of the impact of development discourse on Nepal, see Ahearn, 2001; Des Chene, 1996; Dixit, 1997; Justice, 1986; Pigg, 1996, 1993 and 1992; Pradhan & Shrestha, 1983; Shrestha, 1997.

[15] Those imagined women who get the balance "right" are the New [Indian] Women, as designated by Munshi (1998) and Parameswaran (2001). See above.

[16] Liechty (1996, p. 226) notes that for women who pursue public careers, the negotiation of suitable fashion practice is especially dangerous. In office jobs, which require a certain kind of modern-marked attire and in which women interact with male customers and co-workers, "office girls" may be looked at with suspicion and may be thought to be overly fashionable and therefore promiscuous. A similar argument can be made for the teaching profession.

[17] See Ahearn, 1998; Flueckiger, 1996; March, 2002; Narayan, 1997; Raheja, 2003; Raheja & Gold, 1994; Skinner, Holland & Adhikari, 1994; Srivastava, 1991; Wadley, 1994.

[18] By now, anthropologists have given up the fiction of cultures as coherent systems, and with this fiction that of the unitary, uniform self (Ortner, 2006b). Katherine Ewing (1990) suggests that although in particular moments people usually experience themselves as "timeless wholes," this is the result of the human tendency/capacity to "constitute the self as a string of memories," stringing together *in any particular moment or type of context* only a selection of memories that form a coherent framework, a particular self-representation (267). A person's efforts to achieve integration of multiple such self-representations (into a cohesive self) are never complete, and we employ strategies for dealing with. According to Ewing, individuals "may struggle to integrate their experiences in the midst of conflict only when, because of the particular situation in which they find themselves, they cannot avoid the conscious juxtaposition of inconsistent, inadequate self-representations. We may say that the 'contextual unconscious' is no longer adequate, because contexts have begun to overlap" (271). When I asked Saraswati about the by then four year-old letter I had received, I may inadvertently have created just the kind of context that Ewing describes, wherein self-representations usually separable for Saraswati

threatened overlap, and where the only workable response was denial and silence. While it has been suggested by others that Hindu women's self-representations may lack particular coherences as a result of their differentiated statuses within kinship structures (Bennett, 1983; Kurtz, 1992), the plurality of their self-representations may be especially intense in the contexts of "modernity at large" theorized by Arjun Appadurai (1996), and discussed above. Thus a second and related proposition is that the possible worlds imagined by Saraswati led her to develop such intensely contradictory self-representations -- which she, in turn, found impossible to keep contextually separate -- that the one viable response was the presentation of behaviors understood to constitute 'mental illness.'

[19] Foucault argued that madness is an artifact of contradictions inherent in "the age of reason," and whereby others (the "mad") become the repositories and performers of the chaos that we refuse to acknowledge in ourselves. Indeed, as recent research has suggested, it may be that "people do not in fact go mad, but are driven mad by others who are driven into the position of driving them mad by a peculiar convergence of social pressures" (Cooper 2001, viii). These social pressures are transposed upon certain individuals by others, who themselves are selected by processes intelligible in relation to structural principles but whose workings are ideologically mystified (Cooper 2001). In the European context, those who in an earlier era were shuttled into asylums, later became patients, to be diagnosed and treated (managed, normalized, medicated…) by self-certified experts of the field developed to do so: psychiatry.

[20] A well-known example of this in the context of mid-20th century gender politics in the U.S. was first delineated by Friedan (1963).

[21] On social suffering, gender and silence in the historical context of India and Pakistan's partition, see Das (1991 and 1997). Here, too, the body becomes a sign whose signification is a matter of struggle under conditions of inequality. And here, as well, practices of speech and silence are subject to reversal (Das, 1991, p. 70).