Abstract

This article examines the ways in which romantic love was experienced, discussed, and written about by Nepali villagers in the 1990s. Love letters written by young village residents illustrate how love came to be reconceptualized during this time period as a desirable rather than an embarrassing emotion, one linked up with other achievements perceived as admirable, such as education, development and success. Because love letter correspondences were only made possible by increased female literacy rates in the village, the article also explores some of the socioculturally and historically specific impacts of the acquisition of literacy skills on gender hierarchies and intimate relationships.

Keywords: Love; Literacy; Agency; Gender; Desire; Nepal

Even though we keep meeting in person, I like to write you letters because I like to say that you are my life friend. To my dear, my life's dearest, dearest love: from your lover who is always, always drowning in your love and remembrances, I send love and remembrances forever that, like a river, can never dry up or break.

—From a letter written by Vajra to Shila in 1990

During the 1990s, the residents of Junigau, Nepal, dramatically redefined the emotion of romantic love. In a departure from previous cultural norms and practices, desire itself came to be seen as desirable. Young villagers became increasingly...
eager to experience romantic love, and new types of individuals and relationships were sought after (Ahearn, 2001a; cf. Collier, 1997). Junigau residents such as Vajra, who wrote the letter excerpted earlier, and his sweetheart, Shila, both contributed to, and were swept along by, currents of social change that affected all segments of Nepali society.²

In this article, I focus on the ways in which romantic love was experienced, discussed, and written about by villagers in the 1990s. I also examine the impact (sometimes significant, sometimes negligible) of the acquisition of literacy skills on gender hierarchies and intimate relationships. I maintain that a close analysis of literacy practices in a setting such as Junigau can improve our understanding of how desire is discursively constructed in particular social and linguistic contexts (Besnier, 1995; Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990).

1. Desiring development, and the development of desire

The love letter correspondence of Shila and Vajra illustrates many of these themes. I met Shila on the very first day I arrived in Junigau in 1982 as a Peace Corps teacher. At that time she was a lively, skinny, mischievous little girl of 12 or so who had long since been pulled out of school in order to help her widowed mother with domestic and agricultural chores. From time to time Shila would attend evening female literacy classes, but often she was kept busy at home or in the fields. I met Vajra a few days after my arrival in Junigau when I started teaching at the village school. He was one of my brightest students in seventh grade English, and he eventually went on to study at the campus in Tansen, the district center. In those years I never imagined that the studious, painfully shy Vajra and the vivacious, popular Shila would ever be attracted to each other. Nevertheless, by the summer of 1990, when they were both in their early twenties, it was clear to everyone, including me, that they were courting.

Vajra and Shila had known each other their whole lives, but both say that it was only after they worked together on the construction of a youth club building in 1990 that they began to notice each other. The youth club building was only one of many development projects undertaken in the village in the 1990s. ‘Development’ (bikās) was the watchword of the decade. Especially after a democratic government was instituted in 1990, radio programs, textbooks, and government officials all urged villagers to help develop Nepal.³ During these years, in addition to the youth club Vajra and Shila helped to put up, the following buildings were also constructed in the village of Junigau: a health clinic, six tea shops, a building for Village Development Council meetings, and an English-medium primary school. Villagers also dug

² Even the Crown Prince of Nepal allegedly went on a murderous rampage, killing ten members of his family, including himself, when his parents objected to his choice of a bride. See Ahearn (2001c) and Hilton (2001) for more on the controversies surrounding the tragic events of June 1, 2001.

³ See the special issue of Himalayan Research Bulletin XXI(1), 2001, ‘Nepal after the Revolution,’ for a variety of perspectives on the impact of political change, including the Maoist insurgency, on everyday life in Nepal.
out a jeep road to Tansen, the district center, previously a three-hour walk away, and began sending their daughters to school, either in Junigau or in Tansen, at a rate almost equal to that of their sons.

Higher rates of school attendance and frequent evening female literacy classes led to increasing literacy rates in Junigau, especially among young women in the village, and the ability of more villagers to read and write contributed to social changes in the areas of both love and development. School textbooks and female literacy workbooks in the 1980s and 1990s were saturated with ‘development discourse’ (Escobar, 1995; Grillo and Stirrat, 1997; Pigg, 1992, 1996; Sivaramakrishnan, 2000) that emphasized the importance of individual agency (Ahearn, 2001b) and the fulfillment of individuals’ desires. The ability of young Junigau women to read and write also led to an unexpected application of their newly acquired literacy skills: the writing of love letters, a practice which was previously impossible because of very low literacy rates among girls and women. Once the extraordinarily rapid shift away from arranged marriage and capture marriage toward elopement or ‘love marriage’ began to occur (Ahearn, 1994), young villagers were able to draw upon their new literacy skills to conduct illicit love letter correspondences. Since it remained culturally inappropriate for young villagers to court in any public setting, love letters were often the only way for Junigau residents to communicate their romantic feelings to their sweethearts. But Junigau love letters written in the 1990s did more than merely facilitate elopements. The letters also provided an opportunity for young villagers to talk about what love meant to them, what they desired from a love relationship, and what kinds of people they wanted to become. For these reasons, the literacy practice of love letter writing both reflected and helped to shape the significant social changes that were occurring in the village during this time period.

Such was the case with the love letter correspondence of Vajra and Shila. Even though they lived within shouting distance of each other, there was no culturally sanctioned way for them to ‘date.’ Although they occasionally had the opportunity to sneak away together while working in the fields or going to the village tap to get water, most of their courting took place through letters. This suited Vajra just fine, as he was extremely shy, especially around members of the opposite sex. In a December 1992 interview, Vajra described how afraid he used to be of girls and women; if one accidentally brushed against him, he said, he felt a current (karant) of electricity. Eventually, however, as his parents increased their pressure on him to marry, Vajra started thinking of what kind of person he would like his ‘life friend’ (lāiph phrend) to be. New cultural expectations surrounding marriage had emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in Junigau, and Vajra longed for a marriage that was very different from what his parents and other older villagers had had. Rather than acceding to his parents’ wishes when it came to the choice of a bride for him, Vajra desired a companionate marriage with a woman of his own choosing. Because of the kind of person he hoped to become—a ‘developed,’ educated person—Vajra wanted to be able to choose a similar type of person to be his wife. He hoped to find someone to whom he felt both sexually attracted and emotionally connected—in other words, he desired desire in his marriage.
In explaining how his courtship with Shila got started, however, Vajra did not make himself out to be an active agent in search of the perfect ‘life friend.’ Instead, echoing the ideology of romantic love that became popular in Junigau in the 1990s, he eschewed agency, claiming that love ‘just happens’ to people. Vajra described a phenomenon I have heard echoed in many villagers’ accounts of how they started their courtships: infatuation starts with a ‘dekhā dekh’—an exchange of glances, what we might call in English ‘love at first sight.’ According to this ideology of love, no one has to do anything. Thus, the village agentive theory regarding romantic love that emerged in the 1990s was that love is something that happens to people rather than something for which they themselves are responsible. Love, like other types of emotion, ‘befalls’ or ‘is felt by’ people. In the following account of the picnic at which Shila and Vajra first exchanged glances, note the use of intransitive verbs and impersonal phrasings as Vajra describes how their courtship progressed:

VB: We went on a picnic there, and on the way to the picnic, at that time our courtship started, let’s say, you know! [laughs] A little bit, umm, what should I say, now? At that time our courtship had its ‘start.’

LMA: Did you talk...?

VB: No, we didn’t talk. There was just an exchange of glances, one to the other, the other back—like that, see? Then later, well, well, it didn’t become unbounded in any kind of direct manner. Umm, slowly, slowly, little by little, writing one or two words to each other, like that—yes, like that. I’d come and meet her, and doing so, it happened like that.

LMA: And you exchanged letters...?

VB: Yes, gradually we began to exchange letters, little by little. Later on it became extremely profound, it became very deep. [laughs briefly]

From these remarks, it can be seen that Vajra’s notion of love, like all other people’s emotions, derives from specific socio-cultural interactions, places, and moments in history (cf. Seidman, 1991, pp. 2–3). Junigau love letters of the 1990s both shaped and reflected changing notions of romantic love, thereby demonstrating that there is no universal, ahistorical experience of romantic love that all humans share. Context is absolutely crucial. While every human being might possess the capacity for romantic love [and Jankowiak’s (1995) volume suggests that they do], emotions do not exist as fully formed feelings, identical across all cultures and time periods.

Rather, emotions are constructed in and through linguistic and social interactions. Discourse is therefore central to any understanding of emotions. As Abu-Lughod and Lutz argue, ‘the most productive analytical approach to the cross-cultural study of emotion is to examine discourses on emotion and emotional discourses as social practices within diverse ethnographic contexts’ (Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990, p. 1). Similarly, Jankowiak, a strong believer in the universality of romantic love, nevertheless notes that

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4 Words in quotation marks were spoken in English.
The relative frequency with which members of a community experience romantic love may very well depend upon that culture’s social organization and ideological orientation. What is obviously needed are many more close, fine-tuned analyses of the phenomenon of love as it is experienced and expressed in a variety of social settings, as well as ethnographic and historical contexts (1995, p. 13).

Just such a close, fine-tuned analysis of the changing meanings surrounding romantic love in Junigau reveals that young villagers constructed romantic love in a culturally and historically specific way in the 1990s. They came to perceive love as happening to them; it afflicts and torments them, they said. It catches them in a web, makes them feel like they’re going crazy. Vajra explained this to me in an interview in 1996:

There’s a song in Hindi, see? What it says is in relation to ‘love,’ see, is, ‘pyār nahī kiyā jātā; pyār ho jātā hai’ [Hindi: ‘Love is not created; love just is.’] This means that affection, love, can’t be created. Love can’t be created, see? It happens by itself, it is said. In an ‘automatic’ way, love settles in, one to the other. Now, really, that’s how it happened with me.

Despite Vajra’s increasingly desperate attempts to find an appropriate bride before his parents forced him into an arranged marriage, he still described his love as not having been a product of his own agency (cf. McCollum, 1998; Quinn, 1982, 1996). This concept of love as being beyond one’s control is not new in Junigau. When I asked older people if they loved their spouses, they would often answer with a shrug and a sheepish smile that, yes, they did. Even in cases where a husband might gamble, be verbally abusive, or take another wife, the first wife would frequently tell me that she couldn’t help it; she still loved him. There is a difference, however, between this older idea of love befalling someone and more recent conceptions of the emotion. In earlier times villagers had viewed romantic love with a good deal of shame, or at least embarrassment. Love had no positive aspects to it; in fact, it primarily brought pain and trouble. Several older women shared a saying with me that conveyed their philosophy of love: ‘nasō pasyo, māyā basyo’—‘The vein/hose [i.e., penis] entered, and love followed.’ One would come to love one’s husband, in other words, after having sex with him. This saying is interesting not only because of the causal theory for love it espouses but also because it was almost always said to me in the context of a woman explaining why she stayed with a husband who treated her poorly. This kind of love was far from the empowering kind of love Junigau villagers in the 1990s came to believe in; this kind of love was to be avoided, disavowed, or, if all else failed, reluctantly tolerated.

In the 1990s Junigau young people came to view romantic love as empowering them in other realms of their lives—an emotion of which to be proud, for it was associated with development and success. They continued to consider romantic love to be beyond their control, but they also began to see it as something that linked them with ‘development discourse’ and Western, commodified notions of ‘success.’
It should not be surprising that romantic love became tied up with economic development in Nepal, for Eva Illouz has found a similar connection in the US ‘Far from being a “haven” from the marketplace,’ she writes, ‘modern romantic love is a practice intimately complicit with the political economy of late capitalism’ (Illouz, 1997, p. 22). While ideologies of romantic love in Nepal, the US, and elsewhere disavow any association with crude materialism or economic realities, postulating instead a utopian vision of true love unfettered by mundane economic necessities, such ideologies of love mask the degree to which ideas about romantic love have always both been influenced by, and have had an impact on, the economic structures of particular societies at particular historical moments.\(^5\)

Ideas about love are tied up not only with economic practices in any given society, but also with other social institutions and everyday practices, such as political movements, educational opportunities, gender ideologies, and kinship-based activities. Many Westerners automatically associate romantic love with sexual desire and marriage, and yet these connections are neither inevitable nor necessarily desirable to many Nepalis (cf. Lindholm, 1995, de Munck, 1998). As I have argued here and have demonstrated at greater length elsewhere (Ahearn, 2001a), Junigau villagers came to interconnect romantic love, sexual desire, and marriage in culturally and historically specific ways in the 1990s.

These interconnections can be seen in many of the 200+ love letters Junigau residents generously shared with me.\(^6\) In the summer of 1990, for example, Vajra wrote the following words to Shila, with whom he had been corresponding at that point for about 6 months:

> There’s nothing special [to write about], except that memories of you keep torturing me so much that I’m scratching a few words onto this page in order to give my heart some peace... Come today, and let’s create an understanding that will make our love successful and that will make us never be separated.

In this letter and in many others, it can be seen that young correspondents conceive of love as something that happens to people, torturing them and giving them no peace. And yet, at the same time, love also empowers them, giving them a sense of agency in other parts of their lives aside from romance. In an example from another love letter correspondence, a young man named Bir Bahadur wrote the following in his first letter to his eventual wife, Sarita:

> In the whole ‘world’ there must be few individuals who do not bow down to love... In which case, Sarita, I’ll let you know by a ‘short cut’ what I want to say: Love is the union of two souls. The ‘main’ meaning of love is ‘life success.’

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\(^5\) There is an ongoing debate, for example, as to the causal relation between the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of romantic love as a cultural ideal in Europe. Some scholars see the former as a necessary precursor to the latter, while others see the latter as a necessary precursor to the former. See Giddens (1992), Goode (1959), Lindholm (1995), Macfarlane (1979, 1986), Shorter (1977).

\(^6\) For a detailed explanation of how I collected the letters and ensured confidentiality, see Ahearn (2001a).
Along the same lines, in two later letters, Bir Bahadur writes,

_When love and affection have become steady, one will certainly be able to obtain the things one has thought and worried about._

* * *

_May our love reach a place where we can in our lives overthrow any difficulties that arrive and obtain success._

Thus, in Junigau love letters from the 1990s, love is portrayed as empowering even as it makes people ‘bow down.’ Junigau love letter writers believe that love enables them to achieve ‘life success,’ which they define as carving out lives for themselves that mirror the images they see and hear about in a diverse array of media, from textbooks and magazines to Hindi and Nepali films to Radio Nepal development programs. These images promote a lifestyle based on formal education, knowledge of English, lucrative employment, the consumption of commodities, and a sense of self founded on individualism. Furthermore, when ‘success’ is mentioned in reference to romantic love, Junigau letter writers reveal their assumption, or at least hope, that ‘successful’ romantic love will result in marriage, and that marriage will be idyllic in nature. Even as romantic love is portrayed as being beyond letter writers’ control, therefore, it nevertheless is linked with a sense of agency in other realms of their lives. The same paradoxical qualities of love can be seen in these excerpts from a letter written by Vajra to Shila:

_What on earth is this thing called love? Once one falls into its web, one is ready to do anything at the invitation of one’s beloved. Why, oh why, is it that what you say, memories of you, and affection for you are always tormenting me?_

And yet a few paragraphs later, Vajra writes:

_These days nothing is impossible in this world. A person can do anything._

Shila responded with the following:

_Mother’s Brother’s Son, what is there left [to write about]? . . . May we be successful, I say. What is your wish.........?² Of course, even when there are wishes and desires, no one knows anything about the time and circumstances under which they will be fulfilled._

_Some people say that if it’s their lot in life, [whatever it is] they’ll do it. But it seems to me that it’s up to each person’s own wishes........Even without my telling you this, you would be knowledgeable about it._

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² Three dots with spaces in between them indicate omitted words. A series of eight dots indicates an ellipsis that was in the original letters. Ellipses often appear in Nepali love letters when letter writers want to avoid stating outright what might be too embarrassing for them to admit or too compromising if the letter were intercepted (cf. Ahearn, 2001a: 125).
Thus, love is increasingly associated in Junigau with being ‘developed’ and ‘successful,’ and it is more and more associated with independence and the ability to overcome all obstacles in life. Love has become an agent, and it has made Junigau villagers feel like agents in all realms of their lives but one: love.

2. Genres, genders, and practices

Although Junigau love letters constitute a unique new genre associated with its own set of literacy practices, there are nevertheless many intertextual linkages with other genres and practices in the village. Because Junigau men have been Gurkha soldiers in the British and Indian Armies for many generations, letter writing has long been viewed in the village as a way of staying in touch with male relatives. All letters written in the village are likely to contain some of the same formulaic aspects, such as the date, time, and place of writing; mentions of kinship terms and Hindu gods, such as, ‘Mother’s Brother’s Son, I’m in good health, and I pray to Pashupatinath for your good health, too’; and standard opening sentences such as, ‘There’s really nothing special that must be written; this is only for remembrance’s sake.’

And yet, there are many characteristics of Junigau love letters that set them apart from other letters written in the village. The language of the love letters is often flowery, full of passages like the following: ‘Dear, so dearer than dear, beloved Father’s Sister’s Daughter, with love that is more numerous than the stars in the sky, that is longer than a river, and that, like a river, never dries up, and with such delicious remembrances, from your beloved........I love you from head to toe!’ Also present in many love letters but virtually absent in other letter genres is the use of ellipses, which appear when letter writers want to avoid making statements that are too embarrassing to admit or too compromising to the writer should the letter be intercepted. Sometimes it is very obvious to both the writer and recipient what is intended, while at other times the writer leaves her/his meanings intentionally vague so as to invite the recipient to co-construct possible interpretations. In the passage just quoted, for example, the ellipses clearly refer to an omitted name ‘[from your beloved (Name)]’, which is left out to protect the writer’s identity should the letter fall into the wrong hands. In other cases, there is more ambiguity, as in the following statement: ‘But even if, like an elephant, you don’t speak, still, if you’re going to beg forgiveness, then........you’ll have no other choice but to........’ (cf. Ahearn, 2001a, 124ff.). Since young women have more at stake than young men (i.e., the complete ruin of their reputations) if their love letters are discovered, ellipses appear more often in their letters than in those of their male suitors.

In addition to ornate language, formulaic features, and ellipses, Junigau love letters in the 1990s also contained a great deal of development discourse emphasizing ‘progress,’ ‘success,’ and individual agency. Such development discourse was ubiquitous in the village at the time, saturating female literacy textbooks, primary school textbooks, magazines, novels, Radio Nepal development programs and soap operas, Hindi movies in the district center, politicians’ speeches, and everyday conversations. Young villagers yearned to become ‘developed’ (bikāśī), and these sentiments were
often expressed in love letters in ways that clearly echoed the written and verbal discourses prevalent in the community at the time. This was especially true of the letters written by young men, who tended to have more formal education than the young women. In addition to incorporating development discourse into their letters, many young men also incorporated English (or what they thought was English), since according to their language ideologies, English was associated with the ‘developed’ status they hoped to achieve.

Junigau love letters also echo the love letter guidebooks on sale in the bookstores in the district center (Bright, n.d.; Manohar, n.d.; Movsesian, 1993). While all the letter writers with whom I spoke claimed that they did not consult such guidebooks, the rhetoric, formats, and sentiments of the guidebooks are clearly influential, especially in cases where love letters are written with the assistance of close friends and/or relatives. Although such joint letter writing sessions are reportedly rare, all instances of reading and writing love letters are intrinsically social, as they involve individuals in literacy events that are shaped by socioculturally and historically specific norms and practices (cf. Boyarin, 1993).

The gendered nature of these norms and practices is evident. It can be seen not only in the content and style of the love letters, with women’s letters containing more ellipses, less English, and more references to the importance of trust in a relationship, but also in the ways in which love letter writing articulates with other literacy practices in Junigau. Young village men in the 1990s all attended either the local high school or a private high school in the district center, and they often used the literacy skills they acquired as part of their formal education to read magazines or novels in their ample leisure time, and to write other genres besides letters, such as lists of attendees at wedding feasts, proclamations of the village development council to be posted on the school bulletin board, or calculations for purchases at local tea shops. Most Junigau women, on the other hand, learned to read and write in evening female literacy classes, and their daily work at home or out in the fields often prevented them from applying their skills to other reading or writing tasks aside from love letters.

3. Risky writing

The emergence of a new ideology of love in Junigau in the 1990s both encouraged and was facilitated by the growth of love letter writing, which itself was made possible by increased rates of female literacy. Literacy and love are therefore integrally interwoven in the village. And yet, for newly literate women, neither the new ideas about love nor their nascent reading and writing skills have been unambiguously beneficial. Because women continue for the most part to move into the extended households of their husbands’ kin upon marriage, they then come under the authority of their mothers-in-law, as is customary in Hindu families throughout

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8 For a comparable love letter guidebook featured at a Borders Bookstore Valentine’s Day display in the 1990s, see Lovric (1995).
Nepal and India (Bennett, 1983; Raheja and Gold, 1994). A woman who elopes after engaging in a love letter correspondence risks forfeiting her natal family’s support should her husband turn out to be abusive, her mother-in-law cruel, or the marriage untenable. Many times have I heard Junigau parents warn their daughters that they should not expect to be able to run home to mommy and daddy if things go wrong after they elope. Indeed, there are cases in which a love letter correspondence is followed by an extremely unhappy marriage. And because of a continuing double standard when it comes to gender, the consequences of these infelicitous matches fall more heavily on the women, who must live with their husbands’ extended families, than with the men, who can marry another wife or simply have extramarital affairs.

And yet, although gender and age hierarchies often continue to be enforced in Junigau, the close emotional ties that develop over the course of a love letter correspondence sometimes lead to conflicts resulting in reconfigurations of power dynamics within joint families that benefit recently married daughters-in-law. A new husband’s loyalties, previously assumed to remain with his parents (who in the past were the ones who obtained a wife for him) are nowadays sometimes transferred from his parents to his wife because of the strong emotions engendered by a love letter correspondence.

The following case study illustrates how one Junigau couple utilized their literacy skills to express their desires and embark upon particular life paths, sometimes challenging and sometimes reinforcing (wittingly or unwittingly) existing gender hierarchies in the process.

3.1. Durga Kumari’s two love letter correspondences

It was not the sort of wedding gift Mirgun Dev had expected: a pillowcase full of incriminating letters that his new bride, Durga Kumari, had written to another man. The three youths who delivered it were relatives of the jilted former boyfriend, and they insisted on presenting their ‘gift’ to Mirgun Dev in person. It was the eve of the post-wedding dhobhet feast in the summer of 1995, and the courtyard at Mirgun Dev’s house was full of people preparing food and alcohol to take to Durga Kumari’s parents’ house for the blessing ceremony the next day. Upon looking inside the pillowcase and realizing what it contained, Mirgun Dev flew into a rage, storming up to the attic to escape the prying eyes of neighbors and family. Once there, he quickly downed two bottles of raksi, the rice alcohol that the women of Mirgun Dev’s family had distilled to take to the feast. Thus fortified, he returned to the courtyard and searched out Durga Kumari, threatening within earshot of everyone to kick her out of his house because of her correspondence with another man prior to her marriage to Mirgun Dev. Following her into the tiny room they had occupied during the two weeks since their elopement, Mirgun Dev accused her of not being a virgin when he married her and, half-crying and half-shouting, he shoved her against the wall. I was worried that the violence would escalate, but, fortunately, Mirgun Dev’s sister and mother were able to calm him down. ‘This is your wife!’ they reminded him. ‘She’s yours now, no matter what happened in the past! Just forget it!’ The scene ended with Mirgun Dev sobbing himself to sleep.
As shocked as Mirgun Dev appeared to be when he discovered what the pillow-case contained, he had received a hint of Durga Kumari’s previous relationship from Durga Kumari herself, though he may not have realized it at the time. Mirgun Dev and Durga Kumari had had a very brief courtship consisting of an exchange of several love letters and a single meeting in person. The brevity of the courtship was atypical for the 1990s in the village of Junigau, but Mirgun Dev was under extreme pressure from his elders to find a wife during his two-month leave from the Indian Army. They were so desperate for the labor of a daughter-in-law that they were prepared to arrange a marriage for Mirgun Dev if he failed to bring home a bride himself.

Mirgun Dev had to act quickly, therefore, but his shyness put him at a disadvantage. Unlike other young men in Junigau who had started relationships before enlisting as Gurkha soldiers in the Nepali, Indian, or British Army, Mirgun Dev had been too shy to initiate a correspondence with anyone, and so he had had to start a relationship from scratch when he arrived home on leave. Another villager’s wedding feast provided Mirgun Dev with the opportunity to meet unmarried young women, and Durga Kumari, a pretty, vivacious high school student from the other side of the village, caught his eye. Emboldened by their brief conversation at the wedding feast, Mirgun Dev wrote Durga Kumari a letter. He asked one of his male relatives to act as a go-between and deliver his declaration of lifelong love to Durga Kumari.

Durga Kumari’s response was heartening. She spoke of her happiness at having received Mirgun Dev’s letter and hinted that his feelings of love were reciprocated. She ended the letter, however, with a stern warning to Mirgun Dev not to back out of the relationship before marriage; after all, such a break-up would carry heavy consequences for Durga Kumari’s reputation. A woman who carries on a relationship with one man before marrying another—even if the relationship takes place solely in writing and not in person—risks being labeled a rádi (literally, a widow, but when used as a term of abuse, it means ‘slut’). So, Durga Kumari made the following appeal to Mirgun Dev at the end of her first letter to him:

One thing that I hope you will promise is that you will love me truly and that when you think about the future you will continue to want to do so and won’t break up with me in the middle of our relationship. Okay?

I do not want to go against your happiness; your happiness alone is my happiness.

If you think that loving me will bring happiness into your life, then I will certainly accept your happy words. Not just in this life but in hundreds of lifetimes will I accept and love you.

Later on in the middle of our relationship you are not to do anything [i.e., break up]—understand?

I want you to love me without causing me suffering, okay?
Finally, if you love me, send a ‘reply’ to this letter, okay?

For now farewell,

Your

Durga Kumari

Moving quickly to reassure her, Mirgun Dev responded in his next letter that his intentions were honorable. Indeed, he wanted to elope with her as soon as possible—ideally, he would bring her home to his house as his bride in the next couple of weeks. In Durga Kumari’s second letter to Mirgun Dev, she states that he has completely won her over. She agrees to elope with him, but tells him that they cannot elope until after she has finished her final exams. Her education is important to her, she writes, but she just as clearly declares her eternal love for Mirgun Dev in passages such as the following:

*Mirgun Dev, to find a husband like you would be my good fortune. In this world thousands of people love, but many do so for ’fashion’ and change their love as if love were a thing to be auctioned off. But I consider my love to be like clear water, as pure, immovable, and immortal as the Himalayas.*

It is in this second (and final) letter from Durga Kumari to Mirgun Dev that the incident with the pillowcase full of letters from Durga Kumari to another man is foreshadowed. Durga Kumari guesses that Mirgun Dev has been hearing rumors about her involvement in another love letter correspondence—and indeed such rumors were swirling about the village at the time, for I heard them from at least two sources. In the following passage, Durga Kumari urges Mirgun Dev to ignore such gossip:

*Mirgun Dev, it seems that I have become caught up with you in a web of pure love. I don’t want to give you any hopes based on lies. There are thousands of people who will speak ill of me. In this world people are prepared to do anything for selfish reasons. They don’t do anything else but speak ill of others. The world is like this. Villagers or your friends may speak ill of me to you, but please don’t believe such talk, okay? Between us there should only be honesty in this life. There may have been many other men who wrote me letters—this is true, but I hate all of them and don’t accept any of them—and never have.

I haven’t loved any man because I’ve stayed at home respectfully living with my mother and father. But today I love you because I see that your love is boundless. And I accept your proposal.*

Mirgun Dev believed Durga Kumari’s assertion that she had never loved another man, and so with great happiness he went forward with the elopement, bringing
Durga Kumari home to live with him and his extended family. A Brahman priest was brought in from a neighboring village to conduct a short Hindu wedding ceremony, and all of Mirgun Dev’s relatives welcomed their new daughter- or sister-in-law.

It was two weeks later, just before the newlyweds were to return to Durga Kumari’s parents’ home for the first time since the elopement for the dhobhet blessing ceremony, that Mirgun Dev received the pillowcase full of letters in which Durga Kumari declared her love for another man. After his rage was spent, Mirgun Dev reluctantly went forward with the ceremony, and gradually the relationship between the spouses regained its warmth. By the time Mirgun Dev had to return to the Indian Army, they had put the incident behind them.

Six months or so later, after Mirgun Dev had returned to India, Durga Kumari found herself miserable in her marital home. The stigma of her previous love letter correspondence had not disappeared, and she felt mistreated by her husband’s relatives, especially his mother. She had not been allowed to continue her schooling, as she had been promised, and she was being given all the most arduous tasks in the fields and in the house. Once again she resorted to letter writing, this time to complain to Mirgun Dev about her treatment and to urge him to return home and intervene on her behalf with his mother. Such letters from newly married women to their distant husbands are becoming more common in Junigau. In several recent cases among villagers, including Mirgun Dev’s and Durga Kumari’s, the men have indeed come home and have taken their wives’ sides in the disputes. Life improved for Durga Kumari after that, but Mirgun Dev’s mother felt betrayed when her son accused her of mistreating his wife. Such an act represented further proof, she claimed (as if any were needed!) that the chhucho jovāna, a selfish, mean, or backbiting time period, had arrived.\(^9\) For Durga Kumari and other new daughters-in-law, however, their use of their literacy skills in this manner gives them an advantage over their mothers-in-law, who are members of a generation of females who were rarely taught to read or write. Still, certain gendered notions, such as the importance of a bride’s virginity and the assumption that men are more capable than women of taking effective action, persist even as literacy practices surrounding love and marriage change in Junigau.

**4. Conclusion**

The acquisition of literacy skills by women in Junigau has thus led both to radical social transformations and to a reinforcement of certain gender hierarchies. For any given woman, the use of her reading and writing skills entails risks, especially since a love letter correspondence leaves behind material traces that can be used as evidence against a woman, thereby ruining her reputation and most likely her chances of marrying anyone. Nepali men face no such risks. As Barton et al. (2000), Street

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\(^9\) Villagers use this phrase to refer to the kāliyug, the fourth or iron age, which Hindus believe began on 18 February 3102 B.C.E and will end on 18 February 428,898 C.E., when the world will be destroyed [Turner, 1990(1931): 79].
(1984, 1993), and others note, literacy is not a neutral skill but is instead thoroughly embedded within the power dynamics of the historically and culturally specific contexts in which it appears. In taking this approach to the study of literacy practices, I follow Mike Baynham, who writes, ‘[W]e need to understand literacy as social practice, the way it interacts with ideologies and institutions to shape and define the possibilities and life paths of individuals’ (1995, p. 71).

In the case of Junigau, literacy has exposed villagers to new discourses of development and love, as expressed in textbooks, magazines, and other reading materials. The ability to read and write has also provided individuals with new opportunities—even as it has reinforced some of the gendered inequalities in the village. While the ability to engage in love letter correspondences has provided many young villagers with the chance to conduct courtships, many of which have resulted in elopements, there are also risks involved, especially for Junigau women. Because of a persistent double standard, women have much more to lose if their love letters are discovered, either before they marry, or, as in Durga Kumari’s case, even after they marry. Literacy in Junigau has therefore been far from a neutral technology. Nor, however, has it been the unmitigated asset some would like to believe it to be. Instead, literacy, love, and social change have interacted in Junigau in complex ways that have only begun to manifest themselves.

During the 1990s in Junigau, young villagers used their new literacy skills to help them significantly reconceptualize the notion of romantic love, making it into a desirable emotion to experience and linking it up with other desired achievements, such as success, development, and education. Individuals’ own desires also have begun to take precedence over those of their families, at least in some instances. As Sarita, the young woman who eventually married Bir Bahadur, exclaimed to me as she was trying to decide whether or not to elope, ‘It’s up to one’s own wishes, it is! You should wear the flower you like, you know. You should wear the flower that you yourself like.’ In a complex series of social transformations that are still underway, Junigau residents are redefining what love means in the context of marriage and are re-evaluating what it means to desire someone or something.

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References


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