South Asia

Tharindi Udalagama
Women's Lives after Marriage in Rural Sri Lanka: An Ethnographic Account of the "Beautiful Mistake"

Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2024. 237 pages. Hardcover, $129.00; ebook, $99.00. ISBN 9783031554117 (hardcover), 9783031554124 (ebook).

In this rich ethnography about family dynamics in Sri Lanka's dry zone, Tharindi Udalagama explores concepts of marital happiness and the ways women seek to achieve a "good enough" life within the constraints of their patriarchal rural village (5). The work reveals women's views on respectability, sexuality, marriage, domestic violence, householding, and motherhood. Udalagama's deep familiarity with Sri Lanka and her native fluency in Sinhala allow her to convey the voices of her interlocutors strongly and clearly. The book draws on fieldwork done in 2015–2016 for Udalagama's PhD dissertation. The researcher insightfully discusses her positionality as a "daughter of the village" (28) of Divulvæva—her propriety-imposed behavioral expectations restricted her range of interactions in ethnographically complex ways. Divulvæva village is located in the Mahaweli area, a large-scale irrigation development in the North Central Province.

In chapter 1, Udalagama introduces traditional arranged marriages, authority-challenging elopements, and a middle ground of companionate marriages in which sweethearts marry with the approval of both sets of parents. Women call elopements mistakes, but beautiful ones because they lead to having husbands, children, and houses. Extramarital affairs, domestic violence, abuse, and separations cause ruptures and discontinuities in marriages. Kinship forms the basis of community. The author presents the concept of *baendima* (18)—connections or bonds between people that spread out from the marriage relationship to encompass larger networks and organizations.

Chapter 2 investigates local ideas of a righteous society and precolonial and colonial patterns of farmer interactions with land and water. Udalagama also discusses the strong military presence during Sri Lanka's twenty-six-year-long civil war and the area's rapid, politically motivated development after the war. Within the village, complex relationships govern the selling, buying, and leasing of land.

In chapter 3, Udalagama explores Divulvæva women's ideas about sexuality. The women of Divulvæva feel that women's sexuality should be passive, and post-menopausal wives should be celibate. In contrast, interlocutors consider male sexuality a strong force; women should not say "no" to their husbands, especially if they want them to stay faithful. Married women consider sex as a wifely duty akin to cooking and taking care of the sick. Udalagama suggests that women form their expectations of love and romance as they watch teledramas, discuss the plots widely with their friends, and look for lovers

in the real world. Mobile phones create new opportunities for intimacy, relationships, and sexual and emotional interactions, some of which, if they occur after marriage, border on "virtual infidelity" (33, 85). Women despise "robber-women" (78) who engage in transgressive infidelity with married men as the "antithesis of a 'good' wife" (79).

Chapter 4 addresses the situation of unmarried women. Udalagama explores the Sinhala concept of "shame-fear" (*laejja baya*) (92), or respectable demeanor. This concept dictates that girls should never engage in premarital sex; at puberty they enter a "bad age" (94) that lasts until marriage. Mothers take the responsibility for their daughters' behavior, and infractions weigh more seriously on girls than on boys. Udalagama discusses the complex tie between premarital sex, respectability, elopement, and self-harm. Elopements, though romantic, upset families and create long-term community suspicions about virginity and morality.

In chapter 5, Udalagama shows that the house is a "metaphor for the [social bonds] within" (115). Houses symbolize women's efforts to be good wives and mothers and reveal the family's wealth and well-being. Good houses, built on inherited land, indicate successful marriages. In such houses, women handle ample finances without conflict. In contrast, in "problem houses" (116), people have eloped with unsuitable spouses, daughters-in-law fight with their mothers-in-law, husbands drink to excess, teenagers elope or attempt self-harm, and women experience domestic violence. Udalagama claims that Divulvæva villagers may see problems as a result of the woman's bad karma or blame the wife for not rehabilitating her drunkard husband. Although villagers blame women for household problems, women blame the physical house. They resort to the "science of architecture" (127), a form of astrology by which rearranging house architecture can ameliorate the relationships of the people who live therein. Women publicly demonstrate their efforts to address their family's social issues by spending money on renovations.

To discuss marital difficulties, in chapter 6 Udalagama introduces Lakshmi, an interlocutor whose husband Upul has an affair. The lengthy case study provides details of domestic violence, separation, family interventions, a court case over child support, the problematic behaviors of children, and an eventual unhappy reconciliation. The author discusses the role of the extended family, the community, the police, the courts, and various religious authorities, many of which pressure Lakshmi to tolerate suffering and keep her marriage intact without seeking a divorce. Villagers also form relationships with local deities and supernatural powers.

In chapter 7, Udalagama considers Lakshmi's use of supernatural resources. Villagers interpret Lakshmi's mental difficulties as a result of sorcery done by her husband's lover; Lakshmi engages in counter-sorcery to cure the problem. Ritual practices help Lakshmi come to terms with her suffering and restore her family life. Despite the strength of the ethnographic data, the book lacks a critical lens. The theory is thin and dated, the analysis is inconsistent and undeveloped, and the discussion makes few connections with global conversations. The conclusion introduces some topics and theories that would have been interesting to see integrated throughout: political economics, gender theory, and the anthropology of emotion.

The book touches on older work done in Sri Lanka on kinship and ritual but offers little connection to anthropological literature on sexuality or agency. Overall, the work reads as a promising dissertation under-revised for its transformation into a book. The work

will interest scholars in Sri Lanka and South Asia studies who seek rich case studies about kinship and marriage.

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