

# A Suitable Romance? Trajectories of Courtship in Indian Popular Fiction

PATRICIA UBEROI  
Institute of Economic Growth  
University Enclave, Delhi-110007

## I

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Defining the Field*

This paper analyses the narrative structures and substantive characteristics of a small set of romantic short stories published in the English-language women's magazine, *Woman's Era* (*WE*), over the period from March 1994 to October 1995.<sup>1</sup> Identifying several contrasting trajectories of narrative development in these stories, the paper seeks to understand, in particular, why and how romantic courtship is constituted as so problematic in contemporary Indian society, the criteria of a suitable 'match' that the stories construct and endorse, and the set of circumstances that are expected to lead to a happy conclusion to a romantic encounter—that is, obviously, the marriage of the chief protagonists.

These fantasized accounts of romantic relationships are used in conjunction with other materials published at this time in the same magazine—editorials, non-fiction instructional articles, and the several medical and personal advice columns. The magazine's section of matrimonial advertisements, very often on behalf of rather over-age or otherwise matrimonially defective parties, are of corroborative interest, too. As with *WE*'s self-promotional advertisements, these disclose the uncertain balance between politically conservative positions and the supposedly 'progressive' social values that characterises this magazine and its several sister publications, in English and in some Indian vernaculars.

Symbolic of its stance on social and political issues, *WE* announces prominently that it does not accept advertisements for: government-run gambling (lotteries); cigarettes and tobacco; alcoholic drinks; vigour and sex-strengthening drugs and treatments; and home made educational degrees and courses. It also refuses to publish astrological forecasts, though such features are invariably popular in the mass

media, and offers 50% concessional rates for matrimonial advertisements that do not mention caste or religion, including that of the advertisers.<sup>2</sup>

Though dedicated to the self-improvement of Indian women, *WE* has a marked horror of the independent women's movement, deeming 'women's lib', so-called, a dangerous and foreign-inspired fad that will surely corrupt Indian womanhood and cut at the heart of Indian family life. An editorial of the period we are concerned with neatly summed up the magazine's opinion of 'women's liberation':

There is no doubt that women have traditionally been an oppressed lot. Religion, scriptures, social systems and man-made institutions all gave women a lower place in society. Naturally, the fight for sexual equality has been a long drawn-out war.

In India, the freedom movement also contained the seeds of women's liberation. Most of our national leaders and prominent writers, though males, were champions of women's causes. Naturally, free India's Constitution guaranteed equality of opportunity to women and prohibited any discrimination on grounds of sex.

However, women's liberation cannot be brought about by mere law or constitutional provisions. Centuries-old attitudes have to be changed through education, social work and above all, removing poverty to ensure the well-being of the family. The process of reform has been going on, though slowly.

But then a section of the urban elite women was not satisfied with the reforms: it wanted revolution. They looked towards the West for inspiration where the women leaders had given a new meaning to liberation. Women's lib for them meant what they wanted it to mean. *And what they want amounts to domination over men. Creating problems in the family and rifts between husband and wife were the results of this aggressive women's lib.*

Like most other women's magazines, *WE* focuses generally on home-making. It contains articles on cookery, housekeeping, family relationships, health, child-care, fashion, etiquette and consumer education, and has recently-added sections for film-reviews and Bollywood gossip, and for instructional articles on investment and financial management. The magazine has several write-in advice columns on personal, medical and child-care problems, including the 'Teenache' 'agony column', on which we will draw extensively in this paper. Like its very popular sister publication, the Hindi language *Sarita*, *WE* is widely known and appreciated for its short stories and serialized novelettes, carrying about five short stories in each issue.

Though *WE* assumes an English-educated audience, exudes what one might call a 'cantonment' culture in articles, reminiscences and stories, and takes for granted the fact that many middle class Indian

families will now have close relatives settled abroad, it is much less sophisticated in its content and production values than magazines like *Femina* and *Savvy* that are its closest rivals in the market.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, curiously, *WE* has more than held its own with these smarter publications in a very competitive field, claiming at one stage to be the largest-selling English-magazine in the Indian market. Puzzling over the popularity of *WE*, despite its indifferent quality, the Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipal had concluded that it must be its very *ordinariness* that commended the magazine to its regular readers: it didn't try to 'intimidate' them, he suggested, but sought instead to assist them to cope with the multiple and complex demands of everyday life through simply-written instructional articles and fictionalized portrayals of life-like dilemmas with which readers could easily identify (1990:409; Singh and Uberoi 1994: 98-9). Several informants stressed that *WE* is 'widely regarded as 'safe', wholesome and useful leisure-time reading for the women and girls of the family.

#### *Constructing the Problematic*

Very little has so far been written on the nature and role of romance fiction in contemporary India,<sup>5</sup> and the task of mapping this *terra incognita* is much complicated by the huge volume of output on the one hand, and the differentiation of linguistic sub-cultures on the other. However, a preliminary foray into this field, an analysis of a small set of romantic short stories published in *WE* in 1988-89, revealed some interesting features, the most notable being the preponderance of tales of the development of romantic relationships *after* marriage (see Tyagi 1989; Singh and Uberoi 1994). This was both surprising, given the models of romantic fiction that the writers apparently followed (i.e., the format of the stories in English magazines like *Women's Weekly* and *Woman's Own*), and yet not totally unexpected, given the continued prevalence of the practice of arranged marriage in India.

In sum, the stories of post-marital romance reviewed in that study—and I can see little change in their structure over the intervening years—characteristically began with a newly married couple experiencing problems in their relationship. An event then occurs to put these problems in a new light. Adjustments are made accordingly, and the conjugal relation put on to an even keel. Whatever the immediate cause of marital tension proposed in these stories (and it is interesting that the dreaded mother-in-law was rarely in fact the villain of the piece), the real problem threatening conjugal harmony was what is

called in common parlance an 'ego hassle'. That is, the husband and wife had got themselves into a situation of mutual confrontation in which one or the other has to give in, or both have to compromise if the marriage is to be saved. Typically, if not invariably, the fictional resolution of this conflict involved an asymmetrical 'adjustment' on the part of the wife, who was often assisted in coming to terms with her reality by the advice or example of a kindly person in authority. Conversely, the wife's failure to make such adjustment in good time, as in the 'real-life' confessional tales of marital breakdown also published in the magazine in these years, led inexorably to that most disastrous of outcomes: divorce.

These tales of post-marital romance were the most consistently formulaic and structurally predictable of the *Women's Era* love stories; and they almost always ended happily. They conformed in a sense to an expected model of romantic fiction—only with the not insignificant difference that *they began with marriage and ended with love*, rather than the other way around. They were also, clearly, cautionary tales, consistent ideologically with the overall social attitudes of the magazine in which they featured. Needless to add, the recommendation of 'adjustment' makes sound practical sense in the context of the sexual politics of Indian marriage (see e.g. Kapur 1970), disappointing though it may be to a feminist sensibility.

The tales of romantic courtship in this archive were also, if in a different way, cautionary tales, but they were narratively much more varied. In fact, only half followed the classic romantic formula, from first encounter through difficulties to a declaration of love and a proposal of marriage. The remaining stories scarcely qualified as 'true romance', either ending unhappily, or concluding with one of the protagonists marrying a *third* person—an old flame, for instance, or the person their parents had selected for them. Lacking the compulsory fairy-tale happy ending (Bettelheim 1978:26), these stories of pre-marital romance suggested a marked authorial ambivalence regarding the practice of courtship. This fictional ambivalence was endorsed in the *WE* instructional and advice columns which were similarly equivocal on the question of 'love marriage', neither approving nor disapproving of it *per se*, yet hedged with caution.

As romantic stories, the tales of romantic courtship appeared to us at the time less satisfying than those of post-marital romance, and analytically much more intractable. Our earlier analysis therefore set these texts aside and focussed instead on exploring the more regular narrative structures of the tales of conjugal love, and on documenting the substantive ethnographic details regarding the sources of marital

conflict that these stories disclose. But in this paper, taking courage in hand, we return to the theme of romantic courtship, recognizing that the heterogeneity of narrative formulae in these stories and their unsatisfactory endings—though offensive no doubt to the analyst's sense of order—*themselves* testify to a significant area of anxiety, uncertainty and conflicting norms and expectations in contemporary Indian social life.

There is reason enough for this anxiety, for the stories speak of a phase of the female life cycle, between sexual maturity and its containment within conjugality, for which there is, cognitively speaking, no legitimate space under the traditional culture (see e.g. Yalman 1963). Where the traditional system, normatively speaking, required that girls be married before or immediately after puberty, the social changes of the last century or more have entailed that girls of the class of *WE* readers remain unmarried well after maturity. Yet they are still expected to enter marriage as pure virgins. If one 'sexualized' outside the context of legitimate marriage, the girl's chances of a 'decent' marriage are severely impaired.<sup>6</sup> The mature sexuality of the adolescent girl is thus a source of immense danger, both to herself and to the reputation of her guardian and family. As *WE* warns readers of its aptly-named 'Teenache' column: 'A wrong decision or indiscreet move can spell disaster and ruin a life!' A recent *WE* story, 'No beating about the bush', parodying its own thematic of the virtues of plain speaking, states the dangers of adolescent sexuality quite bluntly:

Leela and Banu, the young college-going daughters of Susan and Rangunath Menon, are resentful and defiant of their mother's restrictions on their movements. Realising that she is getting nowhere with her daughters, Susan appeals to their father, well-known for his plain-speaking approach to life, to do some plain speaking with his own daughters. Primed to his task, Rangunath confronts the girls:

"What's all this I hear, eh?"....

"Did you say that you expected to be treated on a par with young men of your age?"....

"And Bhanu, did you say that in the United States, boys and girls enjoy live-in-arrangements when they cross 18 and it would be a good idea to introduce that system in India?"....

"Listen", ... "do you want to get pregnant by some foolish overstepping...?"

"Yes, that's what will happen if we give you unlimited freedom. You wouldn't know when and where to say, 'no'" What would be the consequences then?...

"We want you to get married as virgins. Understand? Without any pre-marital sex experience. Understand? No man will marry you, if you are

experienced. An Indian groom wants an untouched woman. Understand ....?

"Do you want to lead the life of an honourable housewife or that of a dishonourable harlot? It is impossible to remain an unmarried woman in our Indian society. Or as a single mother. Never!"

The girls bowed their heads in shame...

"Actually", sighed Bhanu, "Daddy is right. It's all right to complain about our parents to friends and talk about wanting more freedom—but we all know in our heart of hearts that our parents have only our welfare in mind when they make rules for us!"

The girls then apologise for their defiance and their mother is overwhelmed with relief. (*WE* 21, 494, July 1994: 128-9).

The forthrightness of this story on a delicate theme is actually quite unusual. Perhaps the bluntness is made excusable by the story's supposedly humorous tone, or by its sound—if somewhat embarrassing—commonsense. For the most part, though, the *WE* love stories (whether of the pre-or post-marital variety) avoid direct mention of sex. On one occasion, a sexual touch was actually a lustful assault on a divorced woman; on another, the hero avoids a sexual encounter by deeming it dishonourable. When sexual attraction and arousal are mentioned, they are usually hinted at indirectly in phrases such as 'sensuous lips', 'fiery eyes', 'glowing skin', 'trim body', 'tumultuous emotions', etc. 'His touch had sent her heart strings vibrating'; 'his electrifying touch had sent a thrill down her spine'. . . are some of the phrases used to describe a situation which, fleeting though it might be, often marks a turning-point in the heroine's mind and in the story-line.

Displacing the problem of sexuality to the personal columns, whose very existence bears witness to a pathological breakdown of normative order, the *WE* stories of romantic courtship propose and seek to resolve an entirely different dilemma. This is the conflict between the lovers' duty towards their families and their desire for each other, between conformity to social norms and expectations and individual freedom of choice, between the wisdom and experience of age and the impetuosity of youth—in all, between the enduring, if now threatened, values of Indian family life and the individualist values of the West (cf. Uberoi 1997. n.d. (a)). This conflict manifests as a problem of choice between the alternatives of 'love' (that is, self-arranged) marriage and 'arranged' marriage (alliance settled by family elders, with or without the express approval of the young couple). The perfect solution to this dilemma is that articulated by the hero of the recent blockbuster Hindi movie (the most successful Hindi movie of all time),

'*Hum aapke hain koun...!*' (Rajshri Productions, 1994). The hero is asked by his elder brother's wife what sort of marriage he wants: an 'arranged marriage' or a 'love marriage'? Seeking the best of both worlds, the traditional and the modern, he replies without hesitating, an 'arranged-love-marriage', and thereupon reveals to his sister-in-law that he has fallen in love with her younger sister and wants to marry her. The remainder of the film is dedicated to making this fantasy come true, despite the formidable obstacles that have to be overcome before individual desire and family responsibility can be reconciled (see Uberoi n.d. (a)).

## II

### NARRATIVE TRAJECTORIES

We now look in greater detail at some of the typical trajectories of the *WE* tales of romantic courtship, paying particular attention to their conclusions, happy, unhappy or open-ended, and noting the factors and circumstances that characteristically determine their contrastive outcomes.

#### a) *Making 'love' Respectable*

A number of the *WE* love stories follow, in general, a rather standard romantic formula—albeit in an impoverished or restricted transformation: (i) a young couple are thrown together by circumstances and fall in love with each other; (ii) there are certain seemingly insuperable obstacles to their union; (iii) an event occurs that crucially transforms the situation; (iv) the young couple are united to live, presumably happily, ever after.

A typical example, of the several we came across in this set, was the story entitled 'The resignation':

Aruna was a smart and pretty 26 year old pharmacist, who wanted to pursue her career and was averse to marriage. Her boss of two years, Deepak, an eligible but 'confirmed' bachelor, has become attracted to her, but hesitates to declare his affections because of her known views concerning marriage. After consulting his brother on the problem, Deepak adopts a policy of alternative bossiness and consideration. This unnerves Aruna.

'Her nerves were on end. Of late, Deepak had disturbed her peace of mind and she could not understand why. The answers lay in her heart, but her ego refused to accept them.' She decides to quit her job, and Deepak appears to endorse this, insisting that 'a woman's place is in the home' and that she had no need to work if she gets married.

Meanwhile, however, Aruna has to accompany Deepak to a business conference, and they go sightseeing together on a lake. Aruna falls into the water and is rescued by Deepak: 'His touch had sent her heart-strings vibrating. His electrifying touch had sent a thrill down her spine.' Deepak proposes to her, but Aruna rejects the proposal. She later regrets her action and confides in her mother.

Next day at work, Aruna hands her resignation letter to Deepak. Deepak begins to apologise for his earlier behaviour, but Aruna reveals her real motivation: she knows he doesn't expect *his wife* to work after marriage! Aruna's parents invite Deepak's parents and relatives to meet them.

There are certain conditionalities for a happy ending in stories of this kind. The first is that the partner should be of appropriate class status, with the man, if possible, in a position of relative authority or seniority (cf. Singh and Uberoi 1994)—for instance, as is often the case in these stories, the relation may be that of employer and employee. Though the match may be self-arranged, it would be of the kind that the young couple's parents would have arranged for them. If there seem to be problems in the match, from the point of social compatibility or physical desirability, the story-line is geared to showing these problems to be irrelevant or illusory. For instance, a lame girl who is self-conscious of her limp walks 'almost normally' once her beloved declares his intentions ('Miss Tamerlane', *WE* June 1994, 1); or a girl with a nasty skin allergy has merely to seek proper dermatological treatment ('An unforgivable omission', *WE* December 1994, 1). An Anglo-Indian girl in love with her German employer, but hesitating to marry him because of the cultural difference, is delighted to find that her fiancé's beloved 'mother' (i.e. step-mother) is actually an *Indian* woman: he's really an Indian at heart, that means. Another young girl with a rather dark complexion discovers, that her German boss is less colour-conscious than her Indian fiancé, who is in any case two-timing her with a fairer friend. Cultural differences in this case fade into the background, compared to the young man's superior human qualities.

Such fictional devices for neutralizing apparent mismatch in physical attributes or social status do not, however, carry over into real life, as the personal columns of *WE* fulsomely attest. On the contrary, the personal columns do not offer much encouragement to couples with very diverse backgrounds, especially—significantly—where the woman is of a higher status or economically better off than the man. Inter community affairs are handled cautiously, depending on the maturity of the couple. A 21 years old college student from a conservative family who has fallen in love with her American pen-friend is



given a stern warning and advised not to 'mess up' her marriage prospects:

Your plans are risky and impractical .... American society and its values and expectations are extremely different from ours. Since you have led a conservative and sheltered life, you will be completely at sea in it.

Westerners feel that Indian women are docile, obedient and accommodative—refreshingly different from their own independent minded, assertive womenfolk. This tempts many of them to marry Indian women, often with disastrous consequences due to the vast disparity of culture, principles and thinking. (*WE* May 1994: 89).

The second conditionality is parental approval of the relationship. It is rarely sufficient for the couple to simply melt into each other's arms as their misunderstandings are dissolved. An elder is usually around to bless or authorize this solution; the couple's parents step into the act and arrange to meet each other; the bride-to-be touches the feet of her prospective mother-in-law; and so on. Without parental approval, it is difficult to make a marriage work, as the *WE* counsellors constantly advise all but the most mature and economically well-established of correspondents.

In answer to an 18 year old girl who was worried that her 24 year old boyfriend might not marry her in the face of strong parental opposition, the advisor queried:

Why are both your families against the relationship? Do bear in mind that it is not an easy matter to marry without family support. Setting up a home, rearing children and looking after a family need a loving family infrastructure.

The disapproval of elders can cause rifts in a marriage with each spouse holding the other responsible for the unhappy state of affairs. (*WE* July 1994 II: 50).

There is also the real material problem of setting up house independent of the resources of the joint family.

The final conditionality is that the love relationship should preferably not have a sexual expression, for sexual intimacy prior to marriage raises the suspicion that the relationship is primarily a carnal one, unlikely to translate into the enduring 'love' relationship of Indian marriage. The only happy solution in such cases is that the relationship should be formalised and sacralised in marriage—providing, that is, that the partners are otherwise well suited to each other. Two stories of our set address this theme explicitly. One, 'Making commitments' (July 1994 I & II).

is about a young man, Varun, who returns from the U.S. along with a live-in

American girlfriend, Suzy. His conservative parents are horrified, and his mother gives Susan a dressing-down in which she reminds her of the cherished values of Indian marriage and family life, and insists that living together without marriage can only do harm to all concerned. Suzy and Varun see the wisdom of all this, and decide to marry after all.

Another story concerns an established career-woman, Jaya, who has a live-in relationship with a successful executive, Kashyap.

They 'make love when the urge takes them, but otherwise live in different worlds and cherish their individual freedom.

In the course of a long train trip, observing her fellow passengers and reflecting back on the satisfaction she felt while caring for a friend's young daughter, Jaya realises that her life lacks something. She now sees that her relationship with Kashyap is a form of escapism from the responsibilities of family and home.

Jaya decides that she and Kashyap should now make a proper commitment to each other, without necessarily jeopardising their respective careers. (*WE* 22, 525: 20-25).

Elders do not actively intervene here, but it is the example of a caring middle-aged couple on the train that sets Jaya's thought in motion in the first place.

Varuna and Suzy, and Kashyap and Jaya could hope to put a sacramental seal on their sexual relationship because they were, in any case, suitably matched. Were it not for the corrupting influence of alien life-styles they would surely have been married. But the same is not true of the majority of examples of pre-marital sex that are aired in the agony columns of *WE*. Very often a lack of commitment has already been shown, the boy perhaps breaking off the relationship and leaving the girl to face the dire consequences in terms of her reputation that *WE* constantly warns of.<sup>7</sup> Worse still, many of the sexual involvements aired in *WE* are actually incestuous. Disturbingly, the counsellors in such cases, as also in the numerous rape cases, often blame the girl for leaving herself open to such a disaster.

#### b) *Putting 'love' into arranged marriage*

A surprising number of stories in our set deal with a young couple who are already engaged to each other, but one or the other of the parties feels uncomfortable with the arrangement, boding ill for the success of the marriage. It requires a dramatic (melodramatic) event, or some wise counsel, to eventually reconcile the young couple happily with each other. These stories structurally mimic the narrative

structure of the tales of the development of post-marital love already described. A good example of such a story is 'Hidden Depths':

Aina is resentful of the fact that, though an educated girl, no-one had thought of asking her opinion when her 'autocratic' father had fixed her marriage to a good-looking and eligible young man, Chaman.

"Why should she toe the line and accept him just because her family wanted it? Had she no right to a will of her own? Shouldn't she decide for herself with whom she wanted to spend her life? It certainly wasn't fair!"

What is worse, she did not care for Chaman's manner and comportment. A reserved person herself, she found Chaman flippant, frivolous and supercilious, and was irritated by his constant chatter and bantering. Her mother urged Aina to give herself time to understand him and appreciate his 'hidden depths'.

One day it so happened that Aina's sister-in-law collapses and has to be taken to hospital. Aina is alone with Chaman, who handles the emergency calmly and efficiently, and with sensitivity to her anxiety. When the news is broken that the sister-in-law is not seriously ill but merely pregnant, Aina rushes into Chaman's arms shedding tears of relief. Despite herself, Aina's attitude to Chaman begins to change.

Soon after, Aina discovers that she has 'uterine' problems. Realising that she might never be able to have children, Aina tries to break off her engagement to Chaman, but he nobly refuses to do so:

"Aina lay wondering how she could have been irritated with such an adorable man. Yes, she loved him and he really and truly loved her. But she would not marry him if the operation [hysterectomy] was performed. She cared too much to spoil his life. But would he be able to live without her?"

As it turns out, a second medical opinion confirms that Aina does not need an operation after all. Chaman throws himself on the bed crying. Aina 'cuddles his head' and they laugh and cry together.

Shortly afterwards, they get married, Chaman 'completely mesmerized by her bridal finery'! (*WE* 22, 510: 52-58).

'Hidden Depths' suggests two distinct problems in arranged marriage. The first is that of reconciling to the loss of autonomy involved in having someone else—e.g. the 'autocratic father'—choose one's marriage partner for one. As Aina's affectionate sister-in-law chides her in this case: 'You do enjoy [Chaman's] company, Aina. You are just averse to the idea of your father deciding whom your husband should be. You don't have anything personal against Chaman!' To this Aina's mother added the conventional assurance that: 'We have your interests at heart, child. We love you and will do the best we can for you.' Indeed, it is widely believed that family elders will be wiser than the young people when it comes to mate selection, since the latter's judgement may be impaired by passion or based on frivolous

considerations. In 'Hidden Depths' the parents' judgment was indeed correct, but Aina had to be made to realise this through the unfolding of events.

Parents and elders who fail to take the initiative in arranging their wards' marriages in good time, or who find fault unreasonably with all proposals, are shown to be doing a disservice to their children. This is all the more so since respectable young women are not expected to be out in the market finding husbands for themselves.<sup>8</sup> In the only story of our set which deals with this issue, 'Speed Breakers' (*WE* December 1994 (I)), the girl is commended for boldly making her own choice, regardless of whether the man meets all the different criteria laid down by her unreasonably fastidious family. This is not a welcome situation, clearly, but it is the best that circumstances allow, and certainly preferable to spinsterhood!

The anxiety attendant on the failure of parents to arrange their children's marriage is reflected in the following letter to the personal columns of *WE*:

I am a 25 year old working girl hailing from a respectable family. I am earning a good salary. My parents do not at all seem concerned about getting me married. Till now they have not seen a single boy for me. Due to this, I remain very worried. I have now started hating my bhabhi [brother's wife], who is of my age and who is not only enjoying the bliss of married life, but is also going to have a baby very soon. Please tell me what I should do. (*WE* Feb. 1995: 123).

Significantly, the writer is not advised, as she might be in a 'courtship' culture, to be more sociable, join a club, make herself more attractive to men, etc. Rather it is suggested that she make an ally of her sister-in-law to bring the question of her marriage to the parents' attention.

The second problem is that of ensuring the personal compatibility of a couple whose marriage has been arranged on entirely different considerations of matched social and class status, perhaps astrological suitability, or a contract of material exchange (dowry). The initial decision having been made, further negotiations regarding the marriage typically put the girl and her family (the wife-givers) in a disadvantageous bargaining position vis-à-vis the boy's family.

Young women are extremely sensitive with regard to personal defects which, if known to the boy or his parents, may affect their marriage prospects or their acceptability in the eyes of the chosen partner. They are also aware that not admitting to these defects beforehand may be a cause for complaint later. Drooping breasts and weight problems are persistent preoccupations in health, beauty and

personal columns. So, too, is short-sightedness. Writes one young woman to 'Teenache':

Next month I am getting married to a man whom I have not yet met. It is an arranged match. I am short-sighted and wear specs at home. When I go out, I use contact lenses.

I will meet my fiance soon. I keep wondering whether I should tell him about my short-sightedness. I am worried that he and his family might not like this fact. Do you think they will feel cheated if I hide this from them before the wedding?

The advisor recommends honesty as the best policy here:

You could, when conversing with your fiance, mention casually that you use contact lenses. Do not sound apologetic, guilty or fearful. Just be matter-of-fact. It is unlikely then that he will make a big issue of this.

Of course, you are not obliged to declare all your shortcomings to your fiance: but if you are frank and open, you will enjoy a relaxed relationship. Your fiance will be gratified to find that you are an honest person who does not keep any secrets from him. This could also encourage him to trust you with the truth at all times.

A broken marriage in the parental generation can also prove embarrassing and threaten marriage prospects. This is the theme of a story entitled 'Family reunion':

Amrita and her husband Pritesh had divorced many years ago, and Pritesh and their son had subsequently moved to the States while Amrita remained with her daughter Meghna in India. Looking back, Amrita realises that 'she could have, with a little patience, easily salvaged her marriage.'

Now Meghna's marriage to Neel is almost fixed, and the young people too have taken to each other. But Neel's parents are still unaware that Meghna's mother and father are divorced. Meghna's family are concerned that Neel's parents may not agree to the marriage when they come to know of it, Neel's mother being most 'particular that her daughter-in-law comes from a good family.' Even if Neel insisted on the marriage in defiance of his mother, it would be bound to create ill-feeling and land Meghna with a host of problems.

As it happens, Pritesh and his son are visiting at this time, and Pritesh proposes the obvious solution – to remarry Amrita and 'become one happy family again.'

Now wiser, Amrita vows not to ruin this 'second chance' in life, 'to pick up the broken threads' and to 'build...dreams anew'. Neel is suitably impressed by the family's warmth and mutual affection. (*WE* 21, 496: 98-104).

The ultimate stigma, needless to say, is a broken hymen. The *WE* counsellors try to argue reassuringly that the existence of a hymen is

not a fool-proof indication of virginity, since the hymen may be ruptured naturally, through menstruation; only a doctor can tell the difference, they insist. But sexually experienced girls on the brink of marriage fret, nonetheless, and continue to inquire about the possibilities of reconstructive surgery.

Beneath the anxiety shown by readers on account of their looks or self-presentation lies the usually unasked question: is sexual attraction and arousal a necessary element in making a viable marriage? A letter in the 'Teenache' section of *WE*, however, brings this problem into the open:

Qu.: Can love be created? My marriage was fixed a few years ago and now we are soon to be married. But I find that whenever we are together he does not arouse romantic emotions in me. In fact, I quite often fantasize about another boy and weave romantic dreams about him, although I have not even exchanged a single word with him. Please help.

The *WE* answer seeks to distinguish the lasting 'love' of an arranged marriage with the 'so-called "love"' that is merely infatuation, but leaves the question of sexual compatibility within marriage un-addressed:

Love in arranged marriage grows with time. Affection, concern, caring and tenderness are all preludes to a deep and abiding love which stands the test of time growing between husband and wife. The so-called 'love' you are feeling towards this other boy you only see but do not speak to is simply an infatuation based on imagination. Make a sincere effort to get to know your fiance, learn to care for his feelings, hopes and dreams – and you will soon find that you love him too.

This was obviously what Chaman was trying to tell Aina when, half-jokingly, half-threateningly, he said: 'You will like me when you live with me and have no option but to remain with me, for I hate divorce' (p.56).

Though sexual attraction is discounted as a grounds for marriage, it is clear from the hints provided in the *WE* stories, and from other ethnographic evidence (see Uberoi 1995), that sex within legitimate marriage, or specifically the sexualization of the virgin-wife in marriage, is expected to mystically transform into the enduring attachment of regular conjugal love. (A pathological example of this reasoning is to be found in a letter from a frustrated young man who wants to know whether he should 'force (his girl-friend) to have sexual relations with (him) so that she knows that she belongs only to (him) and nobody else!' (*WE* Feb. 1995 I: 26).) It is therefore of a qualitatively different order to the infatuated quasi-love that physical intimacy generated outside marriage.

While structurally similar to the tales of post-marital romance, these stories have their own specificity. For one thing, an engagement does not have the sacramental status of a marriage. Thus, once a marriage has taken place the problem is simply that of clearing misunderstanding and ensuring the couple's accommodation to each other. In the case of an engaged pair, the issues is somewhat different, namely, to decide on whether, and under what conditions, the marriage should go ahead as planned. Breaking an engagement is a serious matter, not to be undertaken on trifling grounds or personal whim, and certainly not on grounds that the couple fail to feel attraction for each other!

*WE* advice columns are cautious, steering a delicate path between upholding parental authority and family reputation, and endorsing the progressive social values (as on untouchability and secularism) that the magazine claims to espouse. For instance, advising an educated Muslim woman whose fiance doesn't want her to take employment after marriage, the counsellor suggests: (i) clearing the air on this before entering marriage, lest there be frustration afterwards; (ii) taking elders into confidence; and (iii) coming to a compromise on the issue, namely, 'working till the birth of your first child when you should start devoting your full attention to family and home.' 'Children need full attention and care from their mother, the advisor adds in explanation ("Teanache", *WE* Feb. 1995, I: 26).<sup>9</sup>

In another representation to the personal advice column, a young girl writes that her fiance had found fault with her nose and suggested she have cosmetic surgery done on it. The girl's parents were furious when told, feeling that the young man should never have agreed to the match in the first place if he found his fiance's nose ugly. The boy's mother had apologised on his behalf, but the girl feels that she has now lost respect for him. The counsellor advises breaking off the engagement, not merely on the grounds that 'the boy has displayed a hidden desire for beauty' which may resurface after the marriage, but more, on grounds that 'there has already been a heated exchange of words between the two families and that does not augur well for a good relationship.' Moreover, the boy's 'ego is already bruised' by the reaction of the girl and her father, 'and there is every possibility that he may create problems after marriage.'

In another instance, an engaged girl from a 'very orthodox family' reports her regret and worry at angrily dashing off a letter of protest to her fiance when his parents demanded a Rs. 50,000 dowry. The advisor is reassuring, and counsels discretion:

Although demanding dowry is considered a crime nowadays, many boys, parents ask for it to help the newlywed couple get a good start in their life. Since you have found this family to be a decent one, extortion may not be their intention.

Do not make your parents unnecessarily anxious by confessing your deed. Relax and look forward cheerfully to your wedding. (*WE* July 1994, II: 50).

### III

#### CONCLUSION

The stories of romantic courtship presented in *WE* in the period under discussion follow multiple and complex trajectories, which this short paper has been able to indicate only in the briefest of detail. But beneath the profusion of details and outcomes is a very persistent anxiety and a consistent philosophy. The institution of Indian marriage and the Indian family system are seen to be under threat from an alien value system and a powerful and irresponsible feminist movement. While it is allowed that 'love marriage' is something consistent with a modern and democratic way of life, these stories affirm that sexual attraction in itself is regarded as a fickle basis for marriage. In the fantasized dreams of *WE* readers, love marriage becomes viable only to the extent that it is simultaneously 'arranged-love-marriage'. Alternatively, married couples are invited to inscribe 'love' more actively into their relationship. But in no case is courtship and marriage an affair between two souls: they are merely units within the wider family to which they belong, and their desire must be subordinated to their responsibility to the family collectivity.

#### NOTES

1. *Woman's Era* has the appropriate acronym, *WE*. Altogether 20 issues of *WE* were examined, and a total of 98 complete short stories or novelettes. About three quarters of these were what one might term 'romantic' stories about a man-woman relationship, the majority being of husband-wife relations. Our focus here is on the 28 stories that deal with love relationships before marriage.
2. A quick glance at the matrimonial columns of *WE* will suggest, however, that very few clients availed of these discounts!
3. Editorial, 'Lib and liberation', *WE* 21, 489: 7 (April 1994), emphasis added. See also the publisher's similar comments reported in an interview with Trinidadian writer, V.S. Naipaul (1990: 418).
4. For instance, in September 1995, *WE* announced features on: 'make-up tricks that make you look gorgeous'; 'delightful dahlias'; 'what price sex without marriage?'; 'beware of viral infection in pregnancy'; etc. *Femina* (a *Times of India*



publication) sought to entice readers with: 'Is boredom wrecking your marriage?'; 'I never do things just for the money', Claudia Schiffer bares her soul'; 'Swapna Sundari, learning dance from the "devadasis"; Kavelle Bajaj's multi-million dollar enterprise'; and the lead article, 'you can save your city from dying'. The September issue of the more daring *Savvy* (Magna Publications) advertises: 'TBZ's Yamini Zaveri on the gory goings-on in a traditional jeweller family' (in their series of confessional statements by women socialites); 'hitting the highway' (on the car preferences of glamorous celebrities); 'sex after 40: who has it, who doesn't'; 'do you know your lipstick?'; '*Savvy* takes on Lakshmi Parvarthi and Promod Navelkar'; 'nuns get a kick out of karate'; 'hope for multi-handicapped children'; and 'cook-book filled with sour power'.

5. But see, on woman's magazines in general, Bannerjee 1991; Shukla 1991; Sita Chanda 1991; Wolf 1991.
6. The useful term 'sexualizaion' is from Veena Das' discussion (1995) of the sentencing structure in cases of child rape.
7. See the article, 'Chastity till marriage'. *WE* July 1995, II.
8. In one story on this theme, 'Hunting hearts' (*WE* 21, 498, Sept. 1994), a father despairs of finding grooms for his three strong-willed daughters, and challenges them to find their own husbands, adding the catch that he will not pay a paise in dowry either. The three girls rise to the challenge—the hunt so far initiated by the males of the species had been taken over by the members of the fair sex—and eventually nail their young men. This unconventional approach to matchmaking was obviously redeemed by the jocular tone of the story—and by the girls' ultimate good choice of the sort of young men their parents might have chosen for them.
9. *WE* editorials are constantly vigilant on behalf of Muslim women, especially on issues of triple *talaq* and polygamy. This situation is a tricky one, for in general *WE* endorses women's education but gives homemaking priority over career outside the home. At the same time it sympathises instinctively with the plight of Muslim women in their community. Several short stories valorize home-making over career.

## REFERENCES

- Bannerji, Himani. 1991. Fashioning a Self: Educational Proposals for and by Women in Popular Magazines in Colonial Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly* 26,43:WS 50-62.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. 1978. *The uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairytales*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Das, Veena. 1995. Sexual violence, discursive formations and the State. Paper presented at the seminar on 'Violence, Political agency and the construction of the Self', Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, New Delhi, and Social Science Research Council, New York.
- Kapur, Promilla. 1970. *Marriage and the working woman in India*. New Delhi: Vikas.
- Naipaul, V.S. 1990. *India: A million mutinies now*. London: Minerva Paperbacks (India).
- Shukla, Sonal. 1991. Cultivating minds: Nineteenth century gujarati women's journals. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26, 43:WS 63-65.
- Singh, Amita Tyagi and Patricia Uberoi. 1964. Learning to 'adjust': Conjugal relations in Indian popular fiction. *Indian journal of gender studies*, 1, 1:94-120.
- Sita Chanda, p. 1991. Birthing terrible beauties: Feminisms and 'Women's Magazines', *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, 43:Ws 67-70.

- Tyagi, Amita. 1989. *Courtship and conjugality: A sociological study of the man-woman relationship in Indian popular fiction*. M.Phil dissertation, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
- Uberoi, Patricia. 1995. When is a marriage not a marriage? Sex, sacrament and contract in Hindu marriage. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 29 (1 & 2): 39-345.
- . 1997. *Dharma and desire, freedom and destiny: Rescripting the man-woman relationship in popular Hindi cinema*. In Meenakshi Thapan, ed., *Embodiment: Essays on gender and identity*, pp. 147-73. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . n.d. (a) Imagining the family: An ethnography of viewing 'Hum aapke hain koun...!' In Rachel Dwyer and Chris Dwyer and Chris Pinney, eds., *Pleasure and the nation: The History and politics of popular culture in India* (forthcoming). Wolf, Gita.
1991. Construction of gender and identity: Women in popular Tamil magazines. *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, 43: WS 71-73.
- Yalman, Nur. 1963. On the purity and sexuality of women in the castes of Ceylon and Malabar. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 93, 1: 25-58.