



Working with young women facing pressure to marry

by Swarnima Bhargava



Swarnima Bhargava is an independent practitioner, PhD scholar at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and a supervisor based in India. She has worked as a clinical psychologist and therapist for over 11 years with children, young people and families. Swarnima is particularly interested in feminist narrative practices, narrative research and resisting master narratives and pathologising practices. She would welcome hearing from you at swarnima.bhargava@gmail.com

Abstract

Marriage is a tightly controlled aspect of women's lives in India. It marks a woman as a 'well-settled' adult. There are master narratives in India that govern when, whom and how women marry. This paper is a testimony to two young women resisting pressure to marry. It captures practices and ideas that were helpful in shifting our conversations from pathologising women and their families to challenging the larger sociopolitical master narratives that compel women to marry in pursuit of a thinly described 'good life'. This paper illustrates women's agency and knowledge about living an independent adult life. It invites ways of coming together with family to unite against pressure to marry.

Key words: *India; marriage; feminism; master narratives; patriarchy; singlehood; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: she/her

Marriage as a master narrative

Master narratives are ‘culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors’ (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 323). They are pervasive and ubiquitous and operate stealthily in the background of our meaning-making. In my work with young women, a commonly occurring theme is the master narrative of marriage. Marriage is closely tied to dominant narratives of cisgenderism, heterosexuality, patriarchy, caste, endogamy and compulsory reproductivity. These narratives impel young women to marry and to marry a man chosen by their parents and family.

In India, marriage is usually an arrangement between two families with little scope for personal agency, especially for women (Behere et al., 2011; Srivastava, 2013). ‘Singlehood as such is not just an individual experience but also a familial one, tied to notions of care and responsibility to the nuclear, extended, and national families’ (Ramdas, 2012, p. 841). Thin and rigid stories restrict choices in relation to marriage: whether to marry, when to marry, whom to marry and whose responsibility it is that the marriage takes place. These master narratives work together to limit the agency of women in designing their lives and impel family members to find a ‘suitable man from a good family’ for a young woman to marry.

Arnett (2016) proposed that life stages serve as a master narrative for the life course in a particular culture. Life stages define what is considered a ‘normal’ or ‘good’ developmental progression through life, according to the experiences of those who hold power and privilege. Women’s life progression is defined in terms of their roles in relation to men: as daughters, wives and mothers. The husband is considered the head of the family and the breadwinner (Avasthi, 2010). For able-bodied neurotypical adult women, marriage is the prized and given way of being, whereas singlehood is rife with shame and stigma. To be considered a ‘settled’ adult in India, a woman should be married to a man chosen by her family – usually someone of a similar socioeconomic class, religion, caste and educational background; and she should have children by the end of her 20s or by her mid-30s at the latest. Marriage is regarded as necessary to securing a woman’s financial and physical safety and to ensure her place in society.

In keeping with patriarchal ideas, Indian women are usually forbidden from dating. Women who do date are encouraged to do so with the ultimate goal of establishing a marriage. Once established, there is

a strong social and moral compulsion to continue a marriage regardless of difficulties. Divorced and widowed women face stigma and marginalisation in family and public arenas. Single middle-aged women are assumed to be widowed, divorced, homosexual or undesirable, and to be lacking in fundamental ways. Singlehood as a valid and valuable choice is rare and not readily understood.

Master narratives inform social fabric and government policies. Societal power dynamics create and reinforce expectations about marriage. There are no religious, government or social rituals that specifically celebrate important events of singlehood (Lewis, 1998). For example, weddings are an important milestone for families: those marrying are celebrated as lavishly as possible. But other milestones of adulthood such as getting a job, being promoted or voting may not even merit a mention within larger family or social circles. The institution of the family shoulders responsibility for the care of individuals, and the idea of a ‘chosen’ family rarely shows up outside queer contexts. There are few government-sponsored housing options that cater to unmarried women, and public safety remains a concern for women in both urban and rural spaces in India. High rates of violence against women in the family, workplace and in public spaces build a dominant discourse of danger. These social and infrastructural limitations strengthen the beliefs of women and their parents that unmarried women are not safe to live by themselves without a husband’s protection.

The government polices women and when and whom they can marry. The ‘love jihad’ law, the *Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance, 2020*, states that its purpose is to prohibit religious conversion by ‘force, undue influence, coercion, or allurements or by any fraudulent means or by marriage’. Instead, it effectively ‘promotes gender stereotypes which views the right of the family or community as supreme and while treating women as repositories of “honour”, deprives her of her personality, privacy and dignity’ (Saxena, 2021). It has been used to dissuade women from marrying outside their religious community and has led to interfaith couples and their family members being jailed (Taskin, 2021). This law represents the intersection of the state with patriarchy, sexism and religious intolerance.

Religion also centres marriage. Gods and goddesses in Hinduism are depicted as married. For example, Shiva and Parvati complete each other to form Ardhanareeshvara; ‘Radhekrishna’ represents a unity of Radha and Krishna. Many religious celebrations

focus on marriage (e.g., Karva Chauth, Teej). 'Single men and women are not allowed to participate in religious festivities and marriage celebrations because it is considered unlucky, unholy, and inauspicious. An individual who remains single and never marries feels out of place, socially and culturally' (Shikha, 2009, p. 101). While single men face discrimination and a loss of privilege compared to married men, they face fewer challenges compared to single women. Single men enjoy greater choice in partners than women the same age do. Single men face less discrimination and enjoy more social, economic and professional privileges than would single women in the same position.

Introducing Nivedita and Nitya

This paper is a testimony to the values, intentions and skills of two extraordinary women whom I worked with individually – Nivedita and Nitya. Nivedita was a 27-year-old woman working in the US in a software company. Nivedita lived independently in a cosily decorated apartment with feminist books and posters. She was the eldest of two daughters and her younger sister lived with their parents in India. Nitya was a 31-year-old professional living independently in a metropolitan city in India. Nitya was the eldest of three children with a younger sister and brother. She was an experimental cook and made dim sum from scratch! Nitya was learning to play the ukulele and meditated and journaled as daily practices. Both women shared similarities: they were cisgender and heterosexual and had dated men; they were both eldest daughters, financially independent and living alone away from their families.

Mapping and externalising the problem story

Psychiatry has a history of pathologising experiences that defy easy classification. Externalising practices provide a rich alternative that permits joining with people and distancing from problems that have been held as internalised and at times essentialised.

One of the most significant aspects of externalising conversations is that within them, broader considerations can also be taken into account. When it is understood that people's relationships with problems are shaped by

history and culture, it is possible to explore how gender, race, culture, sexuality, class and other relations of power have influenced the construction of the problem. (Carey & Russell, 2002, p. 77)

These practices make room to unravel threads of sociopolitical contexts and the power of psychiatric discourse that may have knotted into rigid, restrictive identity conclusions, as they did for Nitya and Nivedita.

Nitya and Nivedita were referred to me with diagnoses of 'depression' and 'borderline personality disorder', respectively. These labels can pathologise women and make obscure their experience of what the problem(s) might be. I was curious to get to know the women behind the labels and to see how I might be able to contribute to expanding on what they brought into the room. Locating the problem as external made space to explore how the problems they were experiencing related to the larger contexts of their lives.

For this paper, I will be talking about one aspect of our work: 'pressure to marry'. A poststructuralist and feminist focus allowed me to be sensitive to the multiple social identities that Nitya and Nivedita occupied and to explore nuances of the inequality and discrimination they experienced (Thomas, 2002). Sharing insider knowledge allowed me to visualise what might have been happening in their lives, but 'not-knowing' (Freedman & Combs, 1996) helped me considerably in not making assumptions about Nivedita's and Nitya's *specific* experiences. 'Constant questioning of our own assumptions invites people to question theirs' (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 45), so I invited myself to engage in a process of questioning and remaking what I knew and believed. For example, I know that pressure to marry can come with a sense of being different (or deviant), but I did not know whether this was Nitya's or Nivedita's experience, and if so in which contexts this arose and what shape it took for them. This helped me in holding on to possible places of inquiry that were then collaboratively navigated.

Nivedita's parents were eager for her to marry a young Indian man of similar or higher socioeconomic status and educational background from the same caste, religion and community as her. They spoke to her about marriage frequently and shared her contact details with marriage brokers. These conversations had been upsetting to Nivedita for some considerable time, and she was afraid that they might sour her relationship with her parents. Nivedita experienced confusion and difficulty in conveying her reasons to not marry the men

her parents presented. At times, her parents would stop talking to her if she did not comply with their wishes. Nivedita's cousin, colleagues and friends chimed in at times to insist that she marry 'before it's too late and you only get divorced guys'.

Nivedita had had two significant romantic relationships as an adult. Her first partner ended the relationship citing that she was not 'adult enough' when depression had made it challenging for her to get out of bed, cook and clean. Nivedita had relied on her partner for support with household responsibilities and for emotional support. After this relationship ended, she was left feeling 'not adult enough'. It was important to question this limiting identity conclusion and to uncover what being an adult meant to Nivedita. Nivedita's ex-partner's ideas about adulthood appeared to be obscuring Nivedita's values and intentions for her life. These questions allowed her ideas of adulthood to come to the fore:

- Who is an adult in your eyes?
- Was there a time when you found yourself doing adult things?
- Can you tell me more about what steps you took? What made these steps possible?

We discovered that being an adult and challenging established gender roles were closely related for Nivedita. It was important for her to have a partner who was 'adult enough' to share household responsibilities and who did not follow patriarchal gender norms in which men do not do housework. Thus, in keeping with her values, Nivedita ended the second relationship in which her partner expected her to cook and manage other household chores.

For Nitya, on the other hand, pressure to marry a man of her parents' choice imposed rigid rules about her choice of partner, which led to a break up. Nitya's ex-partner was younger than her, and from a different caste, religion and socioeconomic background. Her parents strongly opposed their marriage on these grounds. They called her repeatedly and even visited her to try to 'bully' her out of this relationship. Nitya's father threatened to go to her place of work and to harm her then partner if she did not comply. They visited her friend's home and asked her parents to join them in pushing Nitya.

After witnessing her parents' determined opposition, her then partner and his family withdrew from the relationship. He abruptly stopped speaking with her and blocked Nitya on all social media, eventually

marrying another woman. This experience was deeply distressing for Nitya, and her stress was compounded by her parents insisting on marrying her to a suitable man. Her younger sister and brother were also recruited to 'family values', which meant siding with their parents. They refused to see things from Nitya's perspective and viewed her actions as rebellious and disloyal to the family, insisting that Nitya not upset their parents. In an effort to find allies within the family, Nitya requested that her older male cousins step in to mediate. In response, her parents threatened to disinherit them. These developments were deeply upsetting, and Nitya reported feeling unsafe.

Pressure to marry exerted pressure on Nivedita and Nitya to appease their parents by marrying men of their parents' choice, and to be 'good daughters' and 'good women' by complying. We explored how pressure to marry was influencing them into a particular way of seeing themselves. It brought in shame and inadequacy and curtailed their freedom to make their own choices. They felt like they were being 'weirdos' and 'bad women' by not doing what family and friends expected of them. Nivedita teared up and admitted to feeling guilty. She said she was a disappointment to her parents and was a 'bad girl'. Pressure to marry wanted Nivedita to give up making her own decisions and to fall in line like other women. It persuaded Nitya to believe that she was a 'disappointing daughter from a toxic family'. She felt very guilty for being a rebel and upsetting her family, and she believed that her unhappiness was her own fault. With this disclosure, I began to understand something of the private stories that Nivedita and Nitya had been living by, and our subsequent work focused on exploring the sociocultural practices that shape this problem and finding exceptions and preferred alternatives.

Effects of pressure to marry on parents and families

Pressure to marry manifested most strongly in Nitya's and Nivedita's relationships with their parents. Nivedita's and Nitya's narratives revealed the effects of pressure to marry on the family and the different ways in which parents were acting under its influence. Holding on to double listening, deconstruction practices and a feminist point of view made these inquiries possible. This work resonated strongly with me as a single woman who lives with similar pressure to marry (albeit not family led). This made it important for me to

check in with myself and make sure I was staying as decentred as possible in these conversations and not locating blame with the parents or providing answers that have worked for me instead of remaining in a curious 'investigative reporter' stance.

Marriage is considered to be the responsibility of parents, and 'good' parents ensure that their daughters make suitable and timely marriages. Attempts to story marriage as a choice and to question the narrative that 'parents should decide the choice of partner' were met with strong resistance by Nitya's and Nivedita's families. Pressure to marry changed the ways in which parents behaved with Nivedita and Nitya. To explore their relationships with their parents outside the problem's sphere of influence, I asked each of them: How would you have described your family and your relationship with your parents before pressure to marry entered all your lives? Whereas the parents had once acted in loving and concerned ways and encouraged their daughters to be independent, the parents' behaviour had now shifted to being controlling and demanding to different degrees. Pressure to marry compelled Nitya's and Nivedita's parents to act in hurtful and angry ways. They avoided speaking to their daughters or called them incessantly about marriage. They worried about it and discussed the matter with other members of the family to unite them against Nivedita and Nitya.

To externalise the problem and unite the family against it, I asked how this problem of pressure to marry was affecting the lives of family members, and the extent to which it was interfering in family relationships. Nivedita and Nitya revealed that this problem left their parents feeling inadequate and that they had failed in their duty to get their daughter 'settled'. Nivedita reported that her parents would avoid social gatherings for fear of being questioned by others about why they hadn't married their eldest daughter yet. Pressure to marry led Nitya's parents to act in violent and coercive ways. Nitya's father told her that she would bring shame to the family if she didn't comply. He would be shamed in their church. These worries led to her parents to act in disrespectful ways by bullying and threatening Nitya.

There is a precedence in India of 'honour killings' in which family members (usually father and brothers) kill a woman who is in love with a man of whom they disapprove. Nitya was terrified that something like this might happen to her or that she might be forcefully married to a man against her wishes. These fears prompted her to reach out to a lawyer, and she felt reassured after exploring her legal options and the help available. These fears also brought suicidal feelings

and sleeplessness to the fore. Nitya took time off from work and focused on meditation and exercise as ways to cope. She also approached a psychiatrist to get a prescription for medication that might ease the suicidal feelings and restore her sleep cycle. Nitya shared these developments with her parents, which prompted them to cease discussing marriage. It brought concern and care to the fore and they grew gentler in the way they spoke to her.

Deconstructing dominant discourses

Social constructionism and feminism invite women to inquire into how broader relations of power influence the ways in which we live. Therapy offers a space to deconstruct dominant discourses of gender and other relations of power. Deconstruction questions

subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices; those so-called 'truths' that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production, those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices, and those familiar practices of self and of relationship that are subjugating of persons' lives. (White, 1991, p. 11)

To locate the problem in its social and historical context, Nitya and I explored where this pressure to marry a man of her parents' choice was coming from and whether she had witnessed this pressure in other families. Nitya and I discovered that pressure to marry affected others in her community, and that many people she knew had been through similar experiences. Her cousins had married women from other communities, much to the initial disappointment of both sets of families. Her sisters-in-law had to work (extra) hard to win the approval of the family. This exploration helped Nitya to distance herself from the sense of wrongness and shame that she had been feeling about her parents. It helped us to more solidly locate the problem as external to herself and her family.

We further located these experiences as a part of larger social discourses of patriarchy, caste and religious politics. Caste status and identity were very important to Nitya's family. Nitya's community had been classified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) by the government, which reflected a history marked by 'suffering from extreme social, educational and economic backwardness arising out of age-old practice of untouchability and certain

others on account of this primitive agricultural practices, lack of infrastructure facilities and geographical isolation, and who need special consideration for safeguarding their interests and for their accelerated socioeconomic development' (National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, 2021). In the town where her parents lived, caste played a prominent role in determining their status, and their family had given importance to education and work to overcome the thin story that caste dictated for them. Nitya's father had worked very hard to get a government job, and he was respected in their church and community. He feared losing that status if he was not able to secure a timely and suitable match for his daughter. For him, religion, caste and region were paramount qualifications in securing their family's place in the community and setting future generations on the path to success. We explored the influence of caste:

- What effect does caste have on the choices open to your family?
- Has caste been important in making decisions in other areas of life?
- Why is it that caste rules don't fit with your dreams for your life?

A match in education and profession were very important to Nitya in choosing a partner. Nitya complained about a restricted pool of men to choose from who 'are educated, belong to the same ST, region and religion'. She prioritised a partner who was ambitious and independent, who enjoyed travel and who was supportive of her.

Mapping the alternative story

Re-authoring practices and double listening helped me to look for exceptions and to trace the preferred ways of being that emerged. Nitya was determined to have more to say about her priorities. She wanted to make her own life choices and to decline her parents' invitations for her to subject herself to their surveillance and to hand over decision-making rights to them. Nitya regretted that she had not been able to loudly oppose her parents and to establish her own point of view within the family. But Nitya had resisted in gentler and quieter ways. We explored what resistance might look like for her through questions like:

- What do you think you were choosing when you stayed quiet and didn't give in?

- What tells you that you are not going along with this pressure to marry?
- What helped you to stay with your ideas for your life in the face of strong criticism?
- Can you think of more possible ways in which you have said no to pressure in the past?

Initially, Nitya's parents' response to her taking over the authorship of her own life was dramatic. They forcefully tried to reassert their authority and invoked ideas of familial loyalty, family and caste pride. She responded to her family's threats by moving to a different city. Through creating distance, she felt less easily reachable and less intruded on. Nitya avoided or disconnected calls when she felt overwhelmed. There came a moment when Nitya reported feeling helpless and despaired that change would not be possible. She turned to her faith and sought comfort through praying, meditating with her rosary and daily affirmations. She prayed to God to 'forgive my father and myself'. Nitya came back to therapy and recruited others, such as a psychiatrist, a lawyer who specialises in women's rights, her manager and close friends, to support her. These steps helped Nitya to visit her parents and to initiate dialogue. When she found her father to be more receptive, she told him what she was looking for in a partner and asked him to not force her.

By loitering with intent and using re-membering questions and contribution questions (White, 2007), we were able to thicken preferred stories of Nivedita's relationship with her mother, and how singlehood is an 'adult and settled life' too. During Christmas, Nivedita's mother visited her in the US and saw her home and ways of living. Nivedita had successfully passed her driver's education exam and rented a car to drive her mother around. It was a proud moment for Nivedita's mother to travel with her and to see how ably she navigated foreign roads and ways of life. Nivedita bought a TV for her mother so she could watch her shows from India – the fact that Nivedita could independently purchase an appliance for the home also awed her mother. To thicken these preferred stories, I asked questions such as:

- What do you think it meant to your mother to see you take these steps?
- What difference do you think it might have made for her to see you living your life independently?
- What do you think it makes possible for her to see this version of life?
- What do you think it added to her knowledge of you?

- If you had to share this story with someone else in your life, who would it be? What might they say in response?

Her mother expressed pride in Nivedita's management of the house and of her finances. At the end of the visit, she acknowledged that her daughter was thriving and living a successful life without a partner. These developments cemented Nivedita's trust in her relationship with her mother and brought them closer.

Independent living

For both Nitya and Nivedita, travelling and living alone were significant ways to assert an independent and wholesome identity. Both women had travelled alone in the past, and even during the pandemic too. This travel expressed their values of independence, trusting their judgement and being an adult. Questions were asked to thicken these stories and to make visible values and know-hows of adulting that had been obscured and diminished by pressure to marry:

- Was it easy for you to travel alone?
- What did it take to make that happen, especially during the pandemic?
- What does that say about what is important to you?

Although she had been taught that women should only travel with family or friends, or only travel solo for work, Nivedita set up adventures for herself around her birthdays. She went skydiving and took a trip in a helicopter! Nitya loved to travel and since college she had taken one or two solo trips each year (even when she was a part of a couple). Tracing the history of these actions revealed that travelling alone helped Nitya to get in touch with her thoughts. She had more recently also begun to enjoy meeting new people on the road. Nitya enjoyed a recent trip to Goa where she met many people her age or older who were single or divorced and were living fulfilling and meaningful lives. These connections were precious to her, and she kept up these relationships even after the holiday ended.

Living a good life

We explored the myriad ways of defining a 'good life', and Nitya was encouraged to craft her own version of a good life. I asked questions like:

- If pressure to marry lost its power, what would your life look like? Where and how would you like to live?
- What would a day in your life look like?
- What do you think this says about what is important to you in life?

Nitya expressed a desire to study and move abroad. She viewed marriage as optional and not mandatory for herself in the future, and as being contingent on meeting a man who she loved enough to marry. She started a new job, which brought her closer to saving money to apply for an MBA and closer to living life at a safe distance from her parents' influence. Nitya said that she valued being at peace and being happy. She wanted to live a life that allowed for greater work-life balance, and she did not want to have her dreams taken over by a job or her parents or a husband.

Nivedita wanted to be taken seriously by her father as an adult who had an opinion on financial investments, buying a car, house and so on. Her idea of a good life was to live independently and to make her own decisions. Exploring with Nivedita what steps she had taken that fit that description, I discovered that she had acted in ways that privileged her own judgement over what others told her she should want. She had been looking to buy a car. Friends, acquaintances and even her boss had given her unsolicited advice to buy a secondhand car because she would 'only be going to the store and to work'. It was hard for her male boss to imagine that Nivedita might have vaster ambitions than the triangle of home-work-store and might want a powerful automobile. She did her own research and decided to buy a 'fancy car' that would allow her to plan road trips out of state and visit friends. Drawing on the absent but implicit to bring forward her intentions and purposes, skills and values (Carey et al., 2009; Freedman, 2012) in making this choice, I asked:

- How did you select this particular car? What skills and knowledge did you use to make this choice?
- Despite others telling you what to buy, you chose something with your own judgement – why was this so important to you?
- What do you think your choice says about what you value and what your hopes are?

Nivedita's choice of car represented a celebration of her financial success and her ability to take care of her own needs. She trusted her own judgement to buy a car that was 'safe, fuel-efficient and equipped to travel

long distances', and the brand marked her as 'living an affluent and successful life'. She talked about sharing pictures of herself with the car on social media (like men do when they buy a sports car) to show people that even women can buy such cars with their own money. Nivedita also spoke about visiting her school in the small town where she grew up in India and we explored what it might mean to the young girls there to see her living and working and in the US.

When exploring Nivedita's values and commitments, she stated that self-reliance and independence were very important to her. She felt that more women should have a say in the trajectory of their lives. She stuck up for this commitment by encouraging her friends to make choices that aligned with their core values (such as travelling or working in a city of their choice), and by buying her mother an iPad to enable her access to information and TV shows of her choice. She funded a round trip for her mother to the US and managed the visa and travel formalities. Nivedita also helped her mother with her anxieties about travelling alone by explaining the journey to her in minute detail. Nivedita's actions inspired a colleague to invite her mother for an extended visit to the US.

Nitya, too, valued independence and chose to rent an apartment alone when she moved to a new city. She wanted to love being by herself and was considering getting a pet for company. She wanted to take responsibility for herself and to live an independent life.

Linking women's lives

An important part of narrative practice is the engagement of audiences to witness and authenticate preferred stories. A common refrain in the stories of women I work with is a lack of relatable young women in their lives who have not married. Celebrities, authors and literary figures were available and were brought into therapy as outsider witnesses and as resources. Some of the women who visited with us were Shilpa Phadke (Indian author of the feminist text *Why loiter* [2011]), Roxanne Gay (author of *Bad feminist* [2014]), bell hooks (Black feminist author and activist [1999a, 1999b]) and Lizzo (Black singer and advocate for body positivity and inclusivity). Their writings and lives served as examples of what might be possible and as inspirations for resisting practices of patriarchy and pressure to marry. However, our engagement with their stories was found to lack an embodied dialogical engagement that my clients could participate in and co-create.

In response to the need to be a part of a community of like-minded individuals, I have been working to start a group for women with a fellow narrative practitioner Anusuya Datta. To this end, we are encouraging women we work with to share their ideas and hopes for how such a group might work and what they might wish to see happen in this space. We are keen to take a decentred yet influential position by making room for multiple perspectives and creating a democratic, collaborative group space. A narrative approach will enable us to come together to engage in conversations to externalise pressure to marry and other injustices. We hope that this space will maintain a feminist position that will validate individual experiences and uncover the operations of power that affect women's lives. Nitya and Nivedita are both excited to participate and to join with other women.

Conclusion

Therapy can be a normalising space that replicates dominant discourses, but narrative therapy provides tools to deconstruct these invisible forces and privileges clients' values and preferred ways of being. The narrative approach made it possible to join with Nivedita and Nitya as they navigated oppressive systems of power. Had I stayed with the labels that entered the room with Nivedita and Nitya, I might have pathologised their experiences as 'irrational thoughts', 'maladaptive interpersonal patterns' or 'inappropriate intense anger outbursts' among other ideas. Without narrative practices that helped to make visible dominant and unhelpful stories that women may have about their lives, I might have pushed for 'normality' by pathologising a desire to not marry as a fear of commitment or intimacy, an unconscious desire to thwart parental authority or a problem with embracing the role of an adult woman (Lieberman, 1991). If marriage is conceptualised as an essential part of family building or as an essential stage of life, this renders invisible the 'goodness' or 'normality' of people who do not choose to marry or for whom marriage is not legally recognised. This affects women more as men are allowed greater latitude to complete this life stage, but women are considered to come with an 'expiry date', as Nivedita put it.

Nivedita's and Nitya's experiences unfolded against larger dominant discourses of patriarchy, caste and cishet ideas of family. Locating the problem in a broader context created openings for us to question the discourses that create internalised and pathological

identities for women. Tracing the history and the sociopolitical context that sustains pressure to marry made visible relations of power such as caste and patriarchy, which have contributed to the construction of the problem. Externalising, using metaphors, double listening and deconstruction facilitated this work. These practices helped us to name and locate patriarchy and caste as they affected the women, their parents and their families. This stance helped the women to join with their parents against pressure to marry instead of villainising them.

Over time, we focused on ways in which Nivedita and Nitya were resisting norms and expectations imposed

on them through ideas of age, family, gender, religion and community. Double listening and attention to the absent but implicit helped us to take conversations to preferred ways of living and storifying their identity. I explored what the women valued in their lives and tried to loiter with stories that illustrated the ways they were living in accordance with their values. We also attempted to look at what that might say about their identity, moving from accounts of being 'weirdos', 'odd' and 'disappointments' to being 'independent' and 'adult'. Connecting these preferred stories to significant others through linking lives in a community will help to maintain these commitments.

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