



Women's Lives after Marriage in Rural Sri Lanka

An Ethnographic Account of
the 'Beautiful Mistake'

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To women who struggle to make habitable worlds.

FOREWORD

The Sri Lankan women who are the focus of Udalagama's account are in many ways a distinct but understudied group. An important driver of recent economic change in Sri Lanka has been the improved status of women and their more direct access to the labour market in the garment industry and in more traditional activities such as tea picking and processing. Women have also contributed massively to the remittance economy following their migration to the Gulf for domestic work. These economic opportunities have given women the means to escape traditional expectations although not necessarily other kinds of exploitation (Lynch, 2007; Gamburd, 2000; Malathi de Alwis, 2002; Hewamanne, 2008). Yet, there are large numbers of women for whom the opportunities that modernity and globalisation bring have failed to materialise. These women are less visible in recent accounts of the position of women in Sri Lanka, yet they continue to provide the stable underpinning of life in rural communities. Most of these women have only been educated up to Ordinary Level and have tended to enter into underage marriages. These marriages also typically begin with an elopement rather than a family-sanctioned and family-overseen match. Such women had not therefore been beneficiaries of the free higher education or employment opportunities provided by the state. Early marriage and motherhood were received as a normative expectation. It is the many predicaments that follow these 'beautiful mistakes' that Udalagama brings to our attention.

The story told in this book is thus in many ways an all-too-familiar one. It concerns women's lives under the weight of powers which are beyond their control and which repeatedly impact upon their life chances and their

happiness. It tells of the hardship and sadness that constitute the fabric of their everyday existence. The sources of this oppression—familial, community and state—are clearly visible in the ways their lives are limited and constrained. In rural Sri Lanka, as in other economically developing settings, women find themselves having to meet hopeless ideals as wives and mothers whilst struggling against presumptions of their inadequacy and inferiority. There continue to be strong expectations of obedience and respect for husbands even when men themselves are failing both as economic providers and in terms of the moral standards they profess to uphold. But, the weight pushing down is one thing. The important question is how do they carry it? Moreover, are they able to push back?

Udalagama's book is important because it takes us behind the obviousness of women's circumstances and into their own reflections upon and, indeed, theoretical analysis of their condition. I use the word theoretical here in the sense of its etymological roots in ancient Greek. In Greek theatre (a word which also shares a root with 'theory') there were actors on the stage and spectators looking on (*theōros*). Whereas the actors could not see what was going on in the interaction between characters, the audience would have full view from which they could engage in their own contemplation and speculation (*theōria*). Udalagama's presence in a rural village in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka had the effect of turning actors into spectators as they narrated and tried to make objective sense of the dramas in which they found themselves living each day. And so, we become familiar with Anusha, Premalata, Madhavi, Lakshmi and many more women of the village of Divulvæva. To borrow from Geertz (who borrowed from Schutz), they are 'consociates'; through their regular face-to-face interactions they are people 'involved in one another's biographies' who 'grow old together' (Geertz, 1973, p. 362).

Such insights are rare. They are only possible if at least three conditions are met. First, there has to be a deep trust and familiarity between the researcher and her interlocutors. Long term, immersive field work brings acceptance as part of a 'we' group in which intimacy, affection, and mutual care is the common currency. Without this closeness it would be difficult to get into the realms of what women actually do, think and feel as wives and mothers rather than having to operate at surface levels of what they are supposed to do, think and feel. It is through a deep sense of mutuality that Udalagama, following Veena Das, is able to throw light on the women's efforts to make 'habitable' worlds. The women's quest is not so much

for ‘good lives’ but rather for ‘good enough lives’, given the hands that they have been dealt.

Second, there is the researcher’s positionality. As a young, unmarried woman it is clear that many of the older women adopted a tutelary role towards Udalagama. It was their duty to introduce her into their world and for her to learn about the obstacles and pitfalls of married life and how these might be avoided in her own life. The woman who took responsibility for Udalagama in the village certainly had ample experience of watching one another find out the hard way about a woman’s lot in rural Sri Lanka. Many of them had learned by their mistakes albeit beautiful ones!

Third, there must be linguistic competence. Without this it would be difficult to catch the nuance present in the complex, high-velocity exchanges that make up the women’s day-to-day social intercourse. These exchanges are spontaneous and ephemeral and, by definition, difficult to catch. Yet, in such exchanges are to be found instances of a profoundly important and critical sense-making. Humour, sarcasm, satire, vitriol and metaphor are used to subvert and challenge the dominant order. Clearly, we are here in realms opened up by James Scott in his seminal work: *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Scott, 1985, p. 137). In the context of a rural Malaysian village, Scott describes the small, day to day acts that the peasants he worked with used to resist the exercise of power without directly confronting the elites that wield it. The kinds of activity that he describes are glimpsed in what Scott refers to as ‘hidden transcripts’. These include: ‘rumour, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity’ (ibid., 137). These transcripts occur alongside the more obvious ‘public’ ones, that signal respect, submission, acceptance and adherence in the face of dominant framings of power relations. In contemporary rural Sri Lankan villages, all are weak in Scott’s sense, but women are the weakest. They suffer a double impediment; not only do they have to shoulder their own considerable burdens but also those of their husbands, whose own lives are hard and often scarred by frustration and disappointment.

In moments of intimacy and reflection, the women reflect wryly on their own past histories, often mocking themselves for their naivety. They recount how ‘happily ever after’ all too often slid into a series of ‘beautiful mistakes’. The ‘beautiful’ refers to a heady blend of desire, romance and expectations of a future that is emotionally and materially secure. The ‘mistakes’ are the realities that the women perforce have to navigate. The

main topics of concern as the women reflect on their circumstances are money, men and sex.

Many of the problems faced by rural women come down to money, or rather the lack of it. Having been by-passed by many of the economic opportunities created in recent times women find themselves at the wrong end of economic liberalisation. To supplement household income they must take on work as agrarian labourers or as self-employed workers cooking, weaving, making spices, or growing plants for sale. The burden is often made heavier by feckless husbands, alcohol, conflict and domestic violence which is commonly threatened if not actually perpetrated. Houses that are conflict-ridden and unhappy are well known in the village. A family's troubles are advertised by the shouting and violent disturbances that erupt on a regular basis. Yet, in her account Udalagama shows how the awfulness of home life is momentarily forgotten as the women when alone together imagine the different lives they might be leading. With the aid of tele-dramas they fantasise about a world in which they are well-off and economically independent and valued.

Whilst women are constrained by expectations of honour and the shame that comes should this be tainted, men appear to be able to operate outside of such moral codes. For the women whose lives are discussed here, men's promiscuity was a major source of unhappiness and a frequent topic of conversation. Deceit and perhaps even desertion leaves women facing an uncertain future. In these circumstances women friends come forward to offer comfort, support and help looking after children. Again, humour is present as balm for the anger and grief that is so acutely felt. In one instance the women are delighted and amused by the suggestion that men's infidelity can be cured by castration. Another adds to the joke by suggesting that men's now detached penises could be buried like the dead. Needless to say, however, in order to be promiscuous there must be women who are complicit. Such women are viewed ambiguously. On the one hand there is acknowledgement that where a husband is absent for some reason, informal liaisons are a means to obtain, by way of gifts, necessities for the house which might otherwise not be affordable. On the other hand, such women are looked down upon because they do not conform to traditional female stereotypes. As such they are the object of ridicule and the butt of jokes.

Not unrelated to the question of men and their behaviour is the perennial interest women have in sex as a topic of conversation. In Udalagama's account we get a glimpse of women reflecting on questions of frequency

of intercourse, abstinence and appropriate sexual behaviour in later years. They also reflect on the nature of men's sexual desires and how to manage these within a relationship. Is a woman's role one of duty where sex is concerned and where does their own pleasure come into the picture? In their conversations they theorise along with a good deal of mockery and bawdy humour about the nature of men's sexuality.

Consideration of men's sexuality inevitably brings out comparisons with women's own. Their concern often settles on the relationship between sex and love and whether it is possible to have one without the other. An intriguing perspective that Udalagama opens up on this question concerns the widespread availability of mobile phones in the village. In a society in which rural women's communication and mobility has generally been limited, the arrival of cheap and extremely powerful communication technologies is having major impacts. Possibilities have opened up for women to have secret liaisons outside the home with men without necessarily having physical contact with them. Engaging in virtual intimacy would seem to provide a whole new arena in which beautiful mistakes might be made.

The tribulations the women face are real enough but an interesting theme to emerge in their accounts of money, men and sex is the role that humour plays in enabling them to cope and perhaps exercise solidarity and a modicum of resistance. In laughing and joking together about their predicaments and reflecting upon the ridiculousness of their often-difficult circumstances, it is clear that the women in Udalagama's account are doing something quite significant. They are demonstrating something akin to what Aristotle described as *eutrapelia* or quick-wittedness and the gentle conviviality in which it thrives. Moreover, Aristotle argued that the capacity to engage in *eutrapelia* was one of the virtues. The idea of virtue is relevant here because in the women's reflections on their circumstances there is frequent return to the questions of what it is to be good in the face of challenging contradictions. Their social interactions are positive in character which allows for playful and indeed experimental exchanges regarding what is good. They also reveal an ability to step outside of mundane realities and in so doing experience a sense of equality. As Bergson long since argued, being able to laugh at the same thing signals a very powerful message that the same world is being viewed in the same way [Bergson, [2008(1911)]. However, most important in the women's humour as described by Udalagama is an acceptance that things are not perfect; expectation and actuality are often cruelly at odds. In essence, the

women's exchanges deal with the imperfections in their lives; how to manage them and the correctives that might be put in place. As McKinney (1998) argues, such humour enables people to know how to be virtuous; it is 'morally educative'. Out of the cut and thrust of the women's banter emerges a shared version of what it is to be good, or rather good enough, in life. The 'beautiful' is beyond their reach and theirs is a pragmatic calculation of how to live with the least of the evils that they face. However, that the women can make light of their troubles by their quick-witted and often irreverent banter does not equate with a happy ending. The joyful freedom that is glimpsed in their private exchanges is a means to cope in an otherwise relentless struggle.

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20 February 2024

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TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

All the statements and conversations presented in this book originate from interviews and discussions I conducted with the villagers. I meticulously recorded these exchanges during our meetings and subsequently refined them. It's crucial to note that all interactions were conducted in Sinhala, and the translations to English provided in this book are my own.

I have included transliterations in English of Sinhala phrases and terms. In this transliteration process, I adhere to the system introduced by James W. Gair and W.S. Karunatilaka for the South Asian Program at Cornell University in 1976.

Vowels marked in a macron indicate long vowels (ā, ā̄, ī, ē, ō, ū). Additionally, I utilise specific characters to denote retroflex consonants, such as ‘ඤ’ (*ja*) for the retroflex ‘j’ sound, which is transliterated as ‘j’ in English. Furthermore, prenasalised consonants, represented by characters combining a nasal sound with a stop consonant, are transliterated into English using digraphs or special symbols to convey their prenasalised nature. For example, ‘ඥ’ (*nda*) represents the prenasalised ‘nd’ sound, is transliterated as ‘ñd’ in English.

SINHALA KIN TERMS

The kinship terms listed below were commonly employed within the village. These terms were not restricted solely to conventional relationships of descent and affinity but were also utilised in a flexible manner to encompass a wide range of other social connections.

- ammā—mother/mother-in-law
- appacci—father/ father-in-law
- attā—grandfather
- ævæssa massina—marriageable male cross-cousin
- ævæssa nænā—marriageable female cross-cousin
- bænā—son-in-law
- duva—daughter
- lēli—daughter-in-law
- loku aiyā/aiyā—elder brother
- loku akkā/akkā—elder sister
- māmā—uncle
- nændā—aunt
- nangi—younger sister
- putā—son
- tāttā—father/father-in-law

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None of this would be possible if not for the bonds established with the villagers of Divulvæva, and the women who generously opened their homes and hearts to me. I foremost extend my heartfelt gratitude to them for permitting me to thrive through the wealth of their life experiences and for continuing to be a source of kinship.

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establishment of my research project in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka. It brings me great pleasure to sustain and build upon these connections in a different context through my current position at the University of Edinburgh.

The collaboration with the officers at the Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka was indispensable, as they assisted in the village selection process and granted access to their offices and archives. This access proved crucial for the success of my work during the fieldwork phase, and I am grateful for their unwavering support throughout this period.

The academic journey that has shaped my current identity is owed in large part to Bob Simpson. Having a guiding figure as magnanimous as Bob has been a true blessing, providing a reliable source of support along this path—an ‘impossible gift’ that I find challenging to reciprocate within this lifetime.

Joanna Simpson, whose friendship and support have played a crucial role in inspiring me. Our conversations, particularly those delving into the intricacies of women’s worlds and their marriages to men’s worlds, have provided me with the inspiration to interpret the stories of the women I have encountered and witnessed.

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Last but certainly not least, I am profoundly grateful for the unconditional love from my husband-Sandun, and my affines, Neesha *ammā*, Chai, along with the abundance of family and friends they have brought into my life. I cannot fathom how fortunate I am to be tied into a family as supportive and loving as all of you.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

This book provides an intimate look into the lives and relationships of the residents of a rural village in Sri Lanka. To bring these individuals to life, I will begin by introducing you to the main characters featured in this narrative. To protect their privacy, I have not used their real names or current ages. These characters are presented in alphabetical order.

Anjali, a 29-year-old woman, was married to Nissanka. The couple had eloped and entered marriage. Anjali was from a nearby village. Nissanka, on the other hand, came from a wealthy family with deep roots in the village. The couple had a 4-year-old daughter. Their home was conveniently located, neighbouring Mihiri's residence and situated next door to Anusha's house. During my fieldwork, Anjali was not employed.

Anusha, a 36-year-old woman, was married and had three sons. She came from one of the first five families (*mul pavul*) of the village, giving her an intimate knowledge of the village and its residents. Anusha played a vital role in my survey work, becoming not only a close friend but also a valuable source of information. She shared how the village had changed since her childhood, providing me with a unique perspective on its evolution. Anusha also kept me updated on village gossip and offered background details on the households we surveyed. Her family's income came from the paddy land she inherited from her parents, which her husband cultivated. Additionally, they earned rental income from a house in her husband's village and received a pension from her husband's previous employment as a soldier for the Sri Lanka Army.

Kanishka, a 40-year-old man, was not someone I had the chance to meet in person. However, I came to know of him through pictures that

Lakshmi showed me on Facebook. She told me that he is a sales manager for a company. He visited the area once a month.

Kumara, a 42-year-old man, was married to Manjula. I had the opportunity to speak with him during my visit to their home for an interview with Manjula. Kumara's family had a notable heritage as practitioners of snakebite treatment in the village, earning them immense respect. However, Kumara hadn't acquired the knowledge to carry on this family tradition. Instead, he was engaged in dairy farming, maintaining cattle for his livelihood. The ancestral house he shared with Manjula and their children offered glimpses of a prosperous past juxtaposed with their more modest present.

Lakshmi, a 35-year-old woman, entered into marriage with Upul after eloping at the age of 17. Following their marriage, they moved to the village. The couple had two children, a daughter named Sumudu and a son named Kavidu. While not formally employed, Lakshmi assisted in managing their electronics shop in town. Remarkably, they were one of the few families who had amassed considerable wealth in the village. I first met Lakshmi at the outset of my fieldwork, and towards the end of my research, I resided in her home with her children for about three months.

Lata, a 60-year-old woman, was married to Navaratne, and they had three children—a son and two daughters—all of whom were married and lived elsewhere. As original beneficiaries of the Mahaweli Development Programme, they had once owned paddy land. However, at the time of my encounter with them, they had leased out their land due to an inability to cultivate it themselves. Their livelihood was sustained through this tenancy arrangement and by cultivating bananas in their home garden. I had the pleasure of getting to know Lata during my household survey visit to her home.

Madhavi, a 24-year-old woman, was married to Suranga, who was Premalata's son. The couple eloped when she was 14 and entered marriage. Both were from the village. They had a four-year-old daughter. I was introduced to Madhavi by Lakshmi. Her house was in the same homestead as Premalata's and hence nearby to Lakshmi's house. Madhavi and Lakshmi were close friends. Madhavi's family circumstances were challenging; she had no father, and her mother worked in the Middle East, rarely returning home. Madhavi was unemployed, and the family depended on Suranga's meagre income from labour work.

Manjula, a 36-year-old woman, was married to Kumara, both of whom were born and raised in the same village. Their families arranged their

marriage, and they settled in Kumara's ancestral home, raising three sons and a daughter. To support her family, Manjula engaged in various odd jobs. I was introduced to her by Nandavati.

Mihiri, a 23-year-old woman, had eloped with her lover, Thushan, and entered marriage. At the time of my fieldwork, the couple did not have children and had chosen to reside in Thushan's ancestral family home. Generations of Thushan's family had called the village their home. Anusha introduced me to Mihiri. She was enthusiastic to show me the local way of life and took me to see the reservoirs, canals, and tanks in the area. I often accompanied her to her father-in-law's chena and paddy fields for various tasks. Mihiri herself was not employed but relied on her husband's income as a soldier in the Sri Lankan army.

Nadee, a 35-year-old woman, was married to Ishan. Their marriage had an unconventional start, as they eloped when Nadee was just 16. Both of their families had deep roots in the village, spanning generations. Together, they raised three children. Their house was situated next door to Nandavati and Piyasiri's home. I saw Nadee and her children in the garden every day from my two rented rooms. Occasionally, I visited her house for conversations. Nadee was not employed, while her husband earned their primary income through a coir mill (*kobu mola*) he operated.

Nandavati, a 58-year-old woman, was married to Piyasiri. Her family had been a part of the village for generations. Their children, a son and a daughter, were married and lived elsewhere. I had the opportunity to rent two rooms in her house when I moved to the village. This arrangement allowed me to interact with her while sharing the household space. Nandavati had a green thumb and found joy in tending to her garden. She supplemented her income by selling betel plants and renting the rooms.

Piyasiri, a 63-year-old man, was married to Nandavati. Having relocated to the village after his marriage, Piyasiri was known for his open and chatty nature, often engaging in conversations with me in the evenings after returning from work. In his earlier years, he worked as a sea diver. However, in later life, he transitioned to breeding ornamental fish for sale. To make a living, he regularly travelled to nearby towns to sell fish and fish tank accessories in local markets.

Premalata, a 55-year-old woman, married Jagoda without knowledge of his prior marriage. Despite this, the couple raised three children, including a daughter and two sons, who had established their own households within the village. Premalata's home was conveniently located near Lakshmi's and next door to Vimala's. I came to know Premalata through

my interactions with Lakshmi. I frequently visited her house and participated in afternoon conversations in her garden, where her jovial personality shone through. While her husband had amassed wealth through contract work in the past, by the time of my meetings with them, they had experienced a significant loss of their assets and were mostly out of business.

Rasika, a 35-year-old woman, remained a figure I never had the chance to meet in person. However, Lakshmi pointed her out to me during a shopping trip in town, and through her, I came to know Rasika's story. At the time of my fieldwork, she was in an extramarital relationship with Upul.

Shanti, a 43-year-old woman, had eloped and married Anura. Tragically, she became a widow in 2012 when Anura passed away from a heart attack. Shanti moved to Anura's birth village after their marriage. Together, they had a daughter and a son. Their family home was situated on a portion of Anura's parents' homestead. I first met Shanti through Anusha during a household survey visit, and our friendship quickly grew. I visited her home regularly. Shanti was not employed in the traditional sense, but she managed to generate income by renting a room in her house and shop space in their homestead. Additionally, she received Anura's pension and owned paddy land inherited from her parents.

Upul, a 39-year-old man, was married to Lakshmi. Although I never had the opportunity to meet him in person, Lakshmi graciously shared photographs of Upul from their family albums. Upul had taken over his father's thriving electronics business in town, and this was his primary source of livelihood.

Vimala, a prominent figure in the village at the age of 59, was married to Kalubanda. Their family had deep roots in the village, spanning generations. They earned their livelihood by working on their paddy land. Their home was located just in front of Lakshmi's house, and this proximity made Vimala a frequent visitor to Lakshmi's residence. I often accompanied Lakshmi during her visits to Vimala's home for friendly conversations or assistance. Vimala also regularly joined Lakshmi, Premalata, and Madhavi for afternoon chats and was an active donor to the village temple.

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