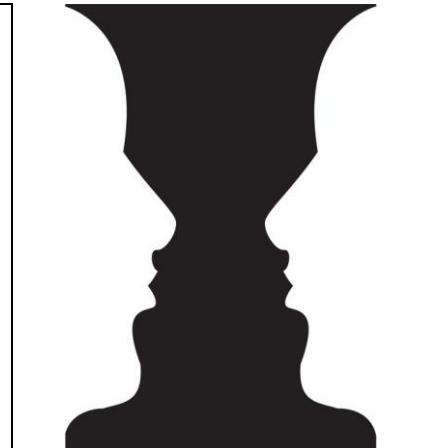


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A love letter

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Abstract

This letter tells the story of a young woman and a man I met during fieldwork with some university students in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 2007/08. Here, Hiranthi - the narrator - writes a letter to her boyfriend of nine months Anish, interpreting the twists and turns of their relationship and highlights the ways in which the relationship fails to meet her expectations. Describing her expectations of romantic relationships and the efforts exerted in the making of it, this letter highlights that my interlocutors aspired towards a particular kind of romantic relationship – a ‘serious’ relationship. In this piece of writing, I use authorial and creative license to contextualise and interpret Hiranthi's and Anish's story within a frame of contemporary life in Sri Lanka, which I put together with the stories of others I met during fieldwork. I use the letter to highlight that romantic relationships of my interlocutors are embedded within particular discourses about the normative conjugal unit, which is essentially heterosexual. It illustrates that romantic relationships consist of a process of investment, a way of embedding one's sense of self. The article highlights the relational aspect of self, pointing out that one's life's worthiness could be tied to the people who are around them.

Keywords

Romantic relationships, Sri Lanka, University students, relational self, life cycles

A prelude...

In 2007 to 2008, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD among university students in Colombo, Sri Lanka. In this period spanning over eleven months, I followed the lives of 24 young men and women pursuing undergraduate studies in different disciplines with a view to understanding the significance of romantic relationships in

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university students' lives. My interactions with these young men and women were a mixture of formal sessions where I guided the conversations, along the themes I had identified and informal chats, during which we reflected on their lives in the context of expectations and lived realities. At the same time, I watched my interlocutors' lives and attempted to understand their world, watching television programmes - tele-dramas, talk shows, music programmes - my interlocutors tipped me to follow and reading the novels and self-help books they advised me to read. I attempted to shed light on what I saw by conducting interviews with those whom the students identified as 'experts on love' – novelists, tele-drama and film directors, TV programme hosts, and astrologers. Reflecting on the material I collected, in my PhD thesis I argue that the significance of romantic relationships in my interlocutors' lives stemmed from the special place these occupied in their visions of a good life and a good future. My interlocutors considered the relationships one enters into in the life stage they were at to be 'serious relationships,' for they paved the way for stable marriages. Thus, my interlocutors reflected on them 'seriously,' considering at the outset of the relationship itself dynamics that affected the relationship such as compatibilities of socio-economic backgrounds, personalities and visions of futures. If one considered their potential partners to be compatible, they then build on that foundation with acts of understanding, communication and availability.

During my fieldwork, I met with women and men from north-eastern, central, western, and southern provinces of Sri Lanka, and inhabiting different socio-economic contexts. Some told me that their parents were wealthy. Some said they were well off and some others described lives of abject poverty. Six of my participants, four women and two men, still lived with their parents, and the others lived in university hostels, or with relatives in the city or shared rooms with friends. All 24 of them were in their early to mid-twenties: the youngest was twenty-one and the oldest was twenty-five. Despite differences, my informants were connected through shared dreams and expectations. They saw themselves as people in transition, moving towards a better life, with the help of their university education. Another element that they shared was an interesting relationship they had with time. My research participants represented themselves as people working with past/ conventions and future/ modernity.

They acknowledged that past experiences influenced how they imagined themselves in the present as well as how they envisioned their futures and this past was multi-pronged. At one level, the past represented their roots, the villages they come from, and how they could not turn their backs on their roots. At another level, the country's past, its policies and politics influenced what my research participants could and could not aspire to. In their current perceptions, they presented themselves as 'connected' young people. They said they were exposed to global currents and, most importantly, to ideologies which they classified as modern. Impact of the country's past limitations, a need to keeping up with the conventions and modern ideologies swayed the ways they envisioned their heterosexual relationships and futures. Being traditional yet modern significantly influenced what they wished for their lives and the kind of

relationships they involved themselves in. Their engagement with time rendered them as 'globals' – being both global and local at the same time (See Kearney 1995).

To speak of their romantic relationships specifically, as 'global beings', they drew from what they saw as global practices in enactments of love. They celebrated St. Valentine's Day. 'I love you', 'sex', 'kiss', 'sentimental' and 'romantic' were terms they used when they spoke of their relationships, not their Sinhala equivalents. At the same time, they were deeply local, for how they conducted themselves in certain regards, especially in relations to bodily intimacy, and their hopes and dreams of futures were entrenched in local concerns.

Moreover, the romantic relationships of my research participants were embedded in tracts of middle class lives. Love appears in these lives as a set of middle class ambitions: a car, a (two-storey) house, children, career and stability, which seemed to have been gleaned from and supported by advertisements. In such a context, as almost all of my research participants boldly claimed, a romantic relationship was a 'means' that lead to an 'end,' which was marriage. In their lives, it was this very attribute that made romantic relationships a path that leads to a life worth living.

In this experimental piece of writing, I present Anish's and Hiranthi's (not their real names) love story. Their story reflects the gap that opens up between experience and expectations and its consequences when a romantic relationship fails to follow the expected line of growth or leading towards an end. I met Anish and Hiranthi on separate occasions during my fieldwork. It was Anish I spoke to first, who voiced his doubts about their relationship when he met with me. He was not sure if he 'had it in him' to be in a stable relationship. Anish had already been in a number of relationships with many women, and was easily distracted- none of his relationships lasted more than three to four months. He held Hiranthi in high regard and did not want to repeat the pattern. Hiranthi, quite differently, had not been exposed to the world of romances and her relationship with Anish was her first. Quite unlike Anish, she was certain that this was a relationship which she would want to make into a serious relationship. Yet, frustrated at its inability to follow the natural path of progress due to constraints Anish imposed on it, Hiranthi decided to end relationship.

Using their story as a base story, in this piece, I take creative licence to fuse the stories I heard during fieldwork with one another, and illustrate the tensions my interlocutors experienced as they tried to negotiate with modern and conventional needs, dreams and expectations. In this effort, I chose to present this story in the form of a letter, a mode of communication which, until its recent diminution in the digital age, has facilitated romantic exchanges across cultures for centuries. I exploit the space of creativity to distance myself from academic conventions in writing and announce my biases in interpreting the story. In choosing Hiranthi as my main protagonist and favouring her voice, I acknowledge in this effort that it is Hiranthi's side of the story that I identify with and in which I heard reason.

Dear Anish,

I hope this letter doesn't catch you off-guard. In a way, I don't see why it should. You know very well that things haven't been right between us lately. For some time now, I've been unhappy that you don't want to tell anyone about us but I couldn't explain why it bothered me so much or even why I thought it was so important that people know about us. I've been thinking about this a lot and it was only yesterday, after a long chat with Bindu, that it all began to make sense to me. I realised that the kind of relationship I want is not one where we tell each other in secret that we love each other. I want a relationship that is celebrated, one in which we could behave like a couple and be treated like a couple. And that is one thing we don't have and that annoys me and upsets me. I thought I owe it to you to explain all these things. Hope you will make an effort to understand what I'm saying or trying to say.

When I came to the university, like most girls we know, finding the love of my life was one thing I wanted to achieve. I thought I'll find my match at the University, because I wanted a man who is brighter and better than me. I've always wanted a man I could respect, take advice from and trust to guide me and make decisions for me and to whom I would surrender myself. Though I don't like becoming second best to anybody in anything I do, in love, I always thought I would surrender myself, my pride. To surrender myself like that, I wanted someone who is better than me. I think most girls are like that. We all want somebody better than us, somebody we can respect. The thing is, whatever we say about gender equality, we live in a society where men make decisions and women follow. If I am with someone I respect, someone who is better than me, then I can trust him to make the right decision. At least that's what I think. That's why I wanted a man who is more intelligent than me, but I know they are a rare-breed. I thought University is a place where smart people come together, because you have to do well at A/Levels to get into university, especially the Law Faculty. So, I thought I could find my match here but I was quite disappointed when I found out all those who were ranked higher than me at entry were women. But then I met you.

You were far from my ideal man. I didn't think much about you at first because you didn't fit my description of an intelligent man. You didn't have good grades at A/Levels and you didn't seem as if you had read much. It was almost impossible to have an intelligent conversation with you about anything. All you did was brag about the number of girlfriends you have had so far. I was shocked when you told me you had your first girlfriend when you were twelve and that she was two years older! What love can you find at that age?! I couldn't believe it when you told us about sneaking out of the house in the evening to meet her. I was shocked she managed to get away from her parents too. We weren't allowed to go anywhere unless Amma or Thaththa chaperoned us. All your juicy stories made me feel a world away from you. I thought you were cute but not really intelligent. I actually thought you have flirted your way into Law Faculty.

But, despite all that, in a strange way, you worked your charm on me. I began to like your quick comebacks to everything I had to say. You often made me feel that what I had learnt from books didn't make me smarter or more intelligent than the rest of you.

You told me that I take life too seriously. I hated you when you said those things but the more we hung out, the more time we spent with each other, I began to feel comfortable around you. I thought, though you didn't have the grades, it doesn't make you less smart. You weren't bookish, but you were clever in your own way. You knew what to do and when to do it. I realised there was more to you than the forever jolly person you present yourself to be. And I began to see that we are a good-match. Your parents weren't strict, true, and maybe that's because you were the youngest of four boys, but we had the same kind of upbringing. We went schools in the suburbs; we weren't rich but never felt deprived in life; we are both Sinhala-Buddhists. On top of all that, our personalities were alike too. We are both achievers, ambitious, arrogant and confident. We don't like giving up or giving in. At times, I felt you were my carbon copy. Slowly I began to realise that I had started falling for you and I felt you were falling for me too. I felt you were making an effort to spend time with me alone. I caught you staring at me a few times when we were with friends and there was always that look in your eyes. It made me feel strange, like melting or weak in my knees or something like that. But I didn't want to admit it, to you, to myself or anyone else. I wanted you to make the first move. And, when you finally asked for my number, I was elated. I knew what it meant.

I still remember the day I got your first SMS. I was so excited when I found out it was from you. It was crazy: my palms went clammy, and my heart was pounding so hard that I thought it would jump out of its cage. I saved that SMS, and read it over and over again. I still have it saved. I saved a few others as well. I have the first one in which you told me you love me and about 30 other messages I got after that. Somewhere along, I can't exactly remember when, you started calling me. Ever since that first call, I waited for it after dinner. Every night, I would gobble up my food and find some excuse or the other to get away to my room so I would be alone when you called. I felt like a little girl, excited and cheeky, running away to hang on the phone with my boyfriend. At first, it was exciting that no one knew of our relationship, that we talked every night, late into the night, and how close we were in our SMSs and calls. It's like we had this little secret world and that world spilled into our ordinary world when we held hands in secret at the University, when we stole kisses early in the morning before anybody came and when our eyes said so much that we couldn't say in words in front of friends.

But now, six months later, it all feels a little different. I love all the attention and praise you give me in the SMSs and phone calls. I revel in it. You make me feel beautiful and smart, and all nice things. And I love it that we are so alike and that we could talk about all sorts of things. When we spend hours on the phone, I feel great because it feels as if we know and understand each other. But my mind begins to cloud over with doubts after we hang up. I begin to think about how we would behave when we see each other tomorrow, about secret kisses and behaving as if we were nothing more than friends in front of friends. It's as if we are living two lives and I begin to wonder which of these is the farce. That makes me go crazy. I go round and round in an emotional vortex. I fear that our relationship means nothing to you. Maybe it's nothing more than yet another fling for you. I get angry when I think these things. Maybe, we want different things from this relationship. You seem perfectly happy with a relationship that lives only in SMSs and

mid-night calls but I want more from it. It feels strange because you and our love give me so much, but, at the same time, you hold back.

It's like this. We both know that, in this stage of life, we don't get into relationships willy-nilly. Like Dhamma was saying the other day, by the time we get to 2nd year or the 3rd year at the University, in our mid-twenties, we start thinking about stability in life. We all know, soon we'll finish our degrees, go out into the world, find jobs, get married and have children. So, at this stage, we begin planning for that kind of life. We take on professional training courses to build extra skills, so we could get good jobs. And, we start serious relationships, ones leading to marriage. That's the best way to find a good husband or a wife. Marriage today is not what it was when our parents were young. My mother says that they got married to whom they were told to get married to, and then make it work. We're different. We would like to find out if we could make it work before we get married. We have different expectations of marriage. For us, it's not about a man and a woman getting together to produce children. Like Aravinda and Amintha say all the time, it's about sharing your life with a companion, and this companion is somebody who sees you, understands you, supports and guides you, and be there for you no matter what. When you have someone like that in your life, you become comfortable in your skin, and you could grow to achieve your highest potential. You feel accepted, because you're loved for what you are. You know, when you tell me that you love my quiriness or my big eyes, that I'm kind, I'm pretty, I'm ambitious but quick tempered, it's like with all those compliments and complaints, you tell me that you see me for the person I am, and, most importantly, you tell me you love the person that I am. You accept me, and you make me feel good about myself. That's why it is so important to us that we find the right person, who could see us, understand us and appreciate us like that.

That's why we put so much effort into finding our right match, before getting into a relationship. It's like looking for that piece that fits the puzzle, you know, a person who balances and complements you. There are so many levels at which you have to be compatible. First of all, your backgrounds have to match, because if there is a clash there, it will be difficult for the two people to communicate and understand each other. Then, the two of you would have to be educated to similar levels. You have to be intelligent enough to communicate with each other at that level. And, then your personalities have to match. When I say matching personalities, it's not like you have to find someone who is your mirror image. It's about finding someone who could appreciate you and complement you and whom you could appreciate and complement. It's when you're compatible that you understand each other, and that's very important for a good, stable relationship.

Once you found someone who is compatible, then we begin to build on that relationship and make it into a stable relationship. When we get into relationships, we do a whole lot of little things to show we love each other. We make an effort to understand each other and show that we understand each other. We build trust and commitment. We make such a valiant effort because we need all that, if that relationship is to become the kind of relationship that a stable marriage could be built on. Everything

matters in a relationship. You know, a little thing like giving a little gift. When I try to get you a gift, I spend hours trying to decide what to get you. It's like that because you know, a gift is not just a gift. When I give you a gift, it's not only that I let you know that you are important in my life, I'm also telling you how I see you. When I get you something, I try to get you a thing that harmonises with you: your qualities, your talents and the person you are. These little things that we give each other and what we do with them, they say quite a lot about how we see each other, us and the relationship. So, how you treat what I give you, whether you respect the gift, use or abuse it, that could tell me quite a lot about what you think of us, and me.

I think it's after I gave you the t-shirt on your birthday that I started seeing that things aren't right with us. That's when I realised that we can't do the things couples do because no one knows we're a couple. You can never wear in public anything I give you because if you do, you have to explain why I gave you that. It hurt me so much that you never wore the t-shirt I bought you for your birthday. I had put so much thought into choosing it – I picked a V-neck because you don't like the collar rubbing on your neck and chose that shade of blue because I thought it complements your complexion. But when I gave it to you at the University the other day, you took one peak at it and put it back in the bag and I never saw it again. You told me you like it but you never showed me you do by wearing it. It hurt me the same way when you told me not to wear the necklace you gave me for my birthday to the university. I like that necklace a lot and was very happy that you chose something I like. I want to wear it and show you how much I like it. But I don't have the liberty to do it. And it hurts.

When things like these hurt me, I console myself thinking you're always there for me on the phone. We spend a lot of time on the phone. When we talk like that, so relaxed and open, it feels like we know each other. It's like you're with me when you're on the phone with me. Not only the calls, those secret SMSs you send from across the table saying you love me, your missed calls to tell me you're thinking of me, lunchtime call so we could have lunch together even though you're not with me, all those things, they make me feel as if you're with me all the time. I feel we're together because I know your day – I know where you will be and what you will be doing at any point of the day – and I know, whatever unexpected thing that happens during the day, good or the bad, you're just a call or a SMS away. Whatever happened, I could reach out to you and you will be there for me. I could trust you to be there for me and you know I will be there for you too and I think it is by being there like that that we build trust in a relationship.

Trust is the most important element in a relationship, especially romantic relationship. How can I get into a relationship and share my body and my life with a man if I don't trust him? I have to know that he won't betray me. He won't use me and abandon me. I have heard far too many stories where girls naively trust men, get into bed with them and then these men either get them pregnant and abandon them or have all the fun they want to have with them and then go and brag about their adventures with their friends. I will not put myself in a place like that, ever. Virginity is not something you give up willy-nilly. I won't share my body with a man unless I trust him and know that he will be with me forever.

Trust is a kind of a knowing or even a sort of a certainty about the other person and that doesn't come naturally. We have to build it and it's hard work. I don't think we start a relationship until we know that that a person can be trusted. But at the same time, that's not enough. It's just a hunch, and you can't build a life on that. We have to go from that hunch to feeling that we trust that person. This is trust building and it's a long process. Trust is sharing everything – what happened during the day, dreams, expectations – everything. Some say you don't have to share everything when you trust someone, that trust is also about knowing and being confident that everything that matters is shared. But I think we should be completely open and share everything and trust wholeheartedly. Trust also has to be mutual. We need to reciprocate trust with trust and that's when it becomes a bond. You know we won't be betrayed and knowing that we won't be betrayed, we trust more. A person you trust like that could make or help you make decisions about career, education, friends and life.

This is what stability in relationships is all about: a person who understands you, who knows you and who trusts you without limits. Though it's counterintuitive, because we know nothing is certain in life, we all look for stability in life and we find it in the feeling that there is this someone who knows, understands and trusts you and whom you trust, who is going to build a life with you and will be with you forever. It's that feeling of having a *magēma kenek*, someone of my own, someone to be close to, someone who will be with me until the day you die, that's we all look for in a relationship and that makes you feel safe and secure.

I know our relationship is only a little over 6 months old. Of course, we haven't come that far in our relationship. But what I realised when I was talking to Bindu yesterday was that we don't seem to be on a path to getting there. Understanding and trust like we have it is not enough for a serious relationship. I thought talking late into the night, we shared our lives, we understood each other and could trust each other. Yes we have a secret but that's a secret we share, and, at first I thought that that made me trust you more. But I was wrong. The more I realise how hesitant you are about going public with our relationship, the more worry about our future and it slowly began to eat at how I see our relationship. What I realised was that trust and understanding for a relationship don't mean much if not for commitment. It's commitment that gives a sense of direction to our relationships and that is what really brings in stability. Commitment shapes our futures. When I commit myself to something, that commitment shapes my today, tomorrow, and the days to follow. It's that commitment that keeps us going and when you refuse to go public with our relationship, I feel you're holding back from committing to that tomorrow.

We both know well that our relationships are not private affairs. We don't just get into relationships with anybody and everybody. We check their backgrounds and probe into their pasts and do all sorts of things before we get into a serious relationship with a man or a woman. I know some of you guys, if you're attracted to a girl in a serious way, you go to their villages and try and find out what they have been up to in the past, and what their parents and relatives are like and all that. I don't think we do all that just for ourselves. We want our new relationships to become a part of the world we belong to.

We need our parents to be happy with our new relationships. Not just parents, we want our relatives, our friends and the whole society to approve it. We need them to approve and accept our relationships, and that's when we really become a couple. Being known as a couple in the eyes of our close ones and in the society, that's the best way to establish commitment.

It's this that we don't have, Anish. Nobody except my sister knows of us and our relationship lives only in phone calls and SMSs. Nobody knowing about us and not being able to talk about us upset me. At times I feel that we don't really exist – like if I can't talk about us, nobody really knows about it, that we don't have a real commitment to each other and all that. At other times, I feel that you probably have things like this with other women too and that's why you want to keep it a secret. I fear thoughts like those. My sister was saying that you probably don't want to go public, because, if you did, you would be less popular with the girls who come into the university next year. I know you're serious about union politics and I know you want to run for Union Presidency next year. I know you want to be as popular as you could be and I know if you are 'single and available,' it will increase your appeal to new female students. I understand that you have dreams and that there are places you want to get to in life. But, this is the thing. I have dreams too. It frustrates me that I can't dream of a future for us because we don't have a real future. I have nothing to go with, apart from your calls and messages. I have 33 SMSs saved on my phone and I read them every day. When I read them, I feel loved and treasured. But that doesn't last. Nobody knows I'm your girlfriend. I'm not treated as someone important in your life. I can't even let our friends know that I am someone important in your life and that I have a place in your life. I can't speak of our relationship in public and I act as if it doesn't exist, and I feel our relationship doesn't mean anything. You say you're committed to us but I have nothing apart from your words to prove it. We can't think of a serious relationship from a place like this. I don't think we can build a relationship that leads to marriage from this kind of a place where not even our closest family knows of our relationship. I know we have had this conversation before and I know you don't want to tell anybody about us just now. But I don't know how long to wait for you to make up your mind. I don't know if you would ever change your mind. I don't see a future for us Anish. So, I'm actually writing to you tell you that I am going to end our relationship. I need commitment and it is not words I'm looking for. I need to be able to live as your girlfriend. I want to be able to speak of our relationship. I want us to be known, seen and celebrated as a couple. I don't want to be your secret. And above all, I don't want to be in a relationship that doesn't move forward. Good luck with life, Anish.

I love you still,
Hiranthi

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Mihirini Sirisena obtained a PhD in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh in 2012. Her thesis focuses on the links between romantic relationships and notions of self and, sheds light on themes of relationality, self, emotions and material world. Currently, she is a Research Associate at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships and is working on a new project on ageing and wellbeing.