

***Invitations to Love. Literacy, Love Letters & Social Change in Nepal*, by Laura M. Ahearn. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001. 295 pages , 31 b&w plates, bibl., index. ISBN 0-472-06784-2.**

Reviewed by Anne de Sales, Oxford

Laura Ahearn has found a treasure here: a corpus of love letters written by villagers for whom this literary genre is entirely new, if only because most of them are the first generation to be literate. For anyone interested in the transformation of the notions of person and agency, this corpus provides some very precious material indeed. But Ahearn did not find this by chance. She has known the authors of the letters for a long time – since 1982, when she arrived in the village of Junigau (Palpa district) as a young Peace Corps Volunteer. She then became an anthropologist and studied changing marriage practices among the Magar of the area. This book is therefore the outcome of the author's long and intimate relationship with her informants, mostly female, although the letters analysed here are written by men and women alike. One of the two case studies is actually based on the correspondence of the male partner only, and commented on by his female recipient.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part the reader is introduced to the site of the study, the central ward of Junigau, consisting of 46 houses. Then the author presents her fieldwork methods (a model of precision) and the five key concepts that she uses in her analysis, helping to locate the work within contemporary debates in anthropology. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens, concerned with the various interactions between macro-processes in society and micro-processes in the individual, provides a relevant theoretical framework.

Literacy is primarily understood here as a social practice rather than a technical skill independent of its context. The text is analysed in the perspective of the social interactions it involves. *Love* is considered as socially and culturally constructed. The emergence of romantic love among the villagers in the 90s is linked to the rhetoric of development discourse that has been dominating rural Nepal for several decades. Although love is partly described as a fatality – "love happens to people", it also appears to empower the afflicted individuals in other realms of their lives and leads them on the path to modernity, individual choice, progress and "life success". *Gender* is seen as the primary field within which power is articulated and therefore directly affected by social

change. In her description of *social change*, Ahearn pays special attention to the tension resulting from the widening gap between the "received interpretations of social forms", or social conventions, and the personal experiences of the individuals. It is argued that, in the situation under consideration, agents are not yet aware of this discrepancy and therefore cannot articulate their rebellion against well-established conventions for behaving and feeling, although they are already striving for new ideals under new constraints. Ahearn refers here to the British cultural historian, Raymond Williams, who provided the notion of "structure of feeling" to pinpoint "the location of patterned micro-processes of social change as they are occurring" (p. 53). *Agency*, at last, is defined as "the culturally constrained capacity to act", and introduces the individual's role in the analysis of social transformation.

Equipped with these conceptual tools, Ahearn proceeds to the description of the transformation of gender and marriages, the second part of the book. Her analysis is based on a comprehensive survey. The disappearance after 1960 of *marriage by capture*, whereby the young woman is kidnapped by physical force, seems to follow on the one hand the growing number of the Gurkha soldiers who enjoy enough wealth to throw a proper wedding and on the other the requisite, generally accepted by now, of the woman's consent. By contrast, in *arranged marriages*, parents do not consult their daughter or even inform her of their negotiations with the parents of the groom. The bride will meet her future husband for the first time on the day of the ceremony. Ahearn gives a fine description of the groom's placement of the red powder in the part of the bride's hair, a symbol of the defloration of the bride and, therefore, the shift from her status of sacred virgin to the status of subordinated wife. Although the resistance of the bride at this very moment is partly ritual, it also offers a space for opposition: "actions that in the past always served to reproduce a system of inequalities became at a very different juncture [in the revolutionary atmosphere of the 90s] ways to transform it or to change the meanings and values associated with it" (p. 98).

Marriage by elopement, whereby the young couple simply "go by themselves", is the third and by now most frequent form of marriage. The courtship tends to be lengthened precisely through love letters. The accounts of elopement by the young women show that they do not conceive of it as being free of coercion, be it their partner's insistence, the urge to silence embarrassing rumours or even fate: "A common thread connects arranged marriage brides' acts of ineffectual opposition with elopement participants' disapprovals of responsibility in their narratives and love letters" (pp. 256-7). A subtle combination of consent and coercion seems to be at the heart of all marital matters, as a comment by a villager makes clear: "In a way, I say that this was probably written to be my fate.

In actuality, we do it ourselves, but it's like that, see? Our fates are written" (p. 256). It could be argued however that this is not specific to the Nepalese situation studied here. The tendency to refer to fate in order to support or even legitimate decisions about one's life seems a rather widespread attitude, even within cultural contexts centred on the supposedly almighty individual. What is specific by contrast is the possibility that Magar women still have to put their fate in the hands of their parents. In a way the range of their choices is even wider than in Western contexts.

In the third part of the book, the author provides information about the written sources of the villagers and their practices of writing and reading over the second half of the 20th century. Besides textbooks published by the Ministry of Education and concerned with the nation building process, there are numerous magazines in circulation. These include publications such as *Kamana* focusing on films, magazines concerned with development and education such as *Deurali* or political magazines such as *Lapha* or *Kairan*. Novels such as *Prem Patra*, "*Love Letters*", are also very popular, as are love letters guidebooks that provide templates for correspondence with intriguing references to famous lovers – such as Napoleon and Hitler.

This complex literary environment is highly relevant to the topic of the book but would need a much more thorough analysis than simply presenting a list of titles, to which the author limits her treatment. Space constraints may have been one of the reasons for this lacuna. As it is, the historical overview is much too superficial and leads to bold affirmations such as "romantic love has existed for generations in Nepal [...]" (p. 173), which is sustained by no evidence and is in contradiction with the claim of the book that romantic love is a rather recent option in the construction of the relationships between two partners. It might have been better to skip this part altogether, however interesting it may be, and instead use the testimonies of the author's more senior acquaintances – such as her own "mother" in the village, who belong to the non-literate era, so to speak. This would have provided a nice contrast and a historical depth to the corpus of love letters written in the 90s, more in conformity with the project of the book to study social change and the "shift of structure of feeling".

Such an approach might have brought into the picture the coded behaviour of the respective parents of the groom and the bride so characteristic of the Magar marriage system. In this system, based on a prescriptive rule of marriage with the mother's brother's daughter, the wife givers enjoy a superior status towards the wife takers. It is surprising that the author, who does mention this hierarchical relationship between the two groups of affine (pp. 82-83), leaves it aside in both her analysis of

social change and her analysis of the relationships between genders. However, ethnographic vignettes – such as Sarita's father refusing to give his daughter unless he is asked "seven, ten, even twelve times" (p. 241) by the boy's party – seem to indicate that traditional Magar codes are still endorsed by some. According to this older view, a daughter is never completely given to her husband, who remains all his life in debt towards his in-laws. This does not necessarily mean that a woman enjoys a better status, but at least that she is protected from the family of her husband and can always go back to her parents (*maiti*), a threat vividly pictured in mythic accounts. Surely this is an important consideration to add to the equation when opting for elopement, and a Magar woman may be in a different position in this respect from, say, a Chetri or a Brahman.

This being said, the book is highly recommendable. It opens Nepalese studies to a much wider reflection about social change and contributes to a fine understanding of the most intimate transformations of the individual. These love letters express the inner conflicts of their authors caught in a web of social conventions, personal desires and new ideals that Ahearn helps us to decipher. The letters have a strong pragmatic component, aimed at influencing the person who is to read them. This may be why they express anger and hopes but rarely joy, being mostly the reflection of yet unsatisfied wishes. And finally they are the first attempts by ordinary people to put their lives into written narratives, and as such constitute precious documents of a literature in embryonic form.