Literacy, Power, and Agency: Love Letters and Development in Nepal

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In this paper, a case study of women’s incipient literacy in Junigau, Nepal, I argue that literacy can be both a catalyst for social change and a result of numerous other types of social transformation. The increase in female literacy rates in Junigau in the 1990s made possible the emergence of new courtship practices involving love letters and facilitated self-initiated marriages, but it also reinforced certain gender ideologies and undercut some avenues to social power, especially for women. Thus, this study reminds us that literacy is not a neutral, unidimensional technology, but rather a set of lived experiences that will differ from community to community. The new practice of love letter writing in Junigau facilitated not only a shift away from arranged and capture marriage toward elopement but also a change in how villagers conceive of their own agency (i.e., their socioculturally mediated capacity to act). Through a close reading of the most salient written sources of development discourse in the village – government textbooks, female literacy textbooks, novels, magazines, and love letter guidebooks – this paper analyses some likely sources for these new ideas about agency and identifies some prototypes for the development discourse so prevalent in Junigau love letters.

Keywords: agency, gender, literacy, Nepal, love letters, development

There is a common saying in the village of Junigau, Nepal: bhāvile lekheko, chhañāle chhekeko, ‘It is written by fate but covered by skin’. This adage reflects a belief not only among the Magars who populate Junigau but also among many other Nepali ethnic groups and castes that at birth a person’s fate is written underneath the skin of the forehead, making it impossible to ascertain what will happen. According to this view, fate is responsible for events that befall the individual, for it is fate, or, in a different translation, God or the gods, who have the power to write. Two other common sayings in Junigau are corollaries to this saying: dekheko mañra hunna, lekheko hunu parchha, ‘It is not enough just to see something; it must also be written (i.e. fated)’ – and bhane ko mañra hunna, lekheko hunu parchha, ‘It is not enough just to say something; it must also be written (i.e. fated)’. Given these connections between fate and the written word, it becomes important to ask what happens when villagers in an incipiently literate community such as Junigau acquire the power to write, and the power to read what others write. How do conceptions of agency, gender, fate, and development shape and reflect new literacy practices? What new ‘structures of feeling’ emerge with these practices?

In this paper, I argue that literacy is both a catalyst for social change and a result of numerous other types of social transformation. In attributing transformational potential to the technology of literacy, however, I hasten to distance myself from Goody and his supporters (Goody, 1986, 1987, 2000; Goody & Watt, 1963), who are strong proponents of what Street (1984) has...
called the ‘autonomous’ model of literacy. Indeed, the bottom line is, as Schieffelin (2000: 298–9), drawing on Kulick and Stroud (1990, 1993) notes, ‘Literacy itself does not have agentive force to change societies. It is humans who are the active force in any transformational processes accompanying the introduction of literacy.’ When Goody describes ‘the transforming effects of literate activity on human life’ (2000: 2), he assumes that the advent of literacy will produce the same social and cognitive transformations no matter who learns to read and write, and no matter where or when literacy emerges. Even caveats such as ‘But I see these effects as trends rather than as necessities’ (1986: 184) merely serve to reinforce a view of literacy that treats it as a neutral technology, independent of the social and historical contexts in which it takes place. In opposition to this view, I concur with Schieffelin (2000: 293), who writes, ‘How a community “takes up” literacy, how it develops, how it is understood and deployed depends very much on the ideology and context of those to whom it is being introduced.’

Thus, my approach is to situate emergent literacy practices socially, historically, and, especially for my purposes here, intertextually. While universal effects stemming from literacy’s purportedly intrinsic nature cannot be identified, particular instances of incipient literacy nevertheless can and should be studied for the complex factors involved. In the case of Junigau, Nepal, in the 1980s and 1990s, female literacy was facilitated by a number of dramatic economic, social, and political changes, and in turn these changes were deepened, challenged, or reconstituted in unexpected (and not always beneficial) ways by the women’s literacy practices – results that could not be predicted by any simplistic universal statement about ‘the power writing may endow upon various elements in a particular society’ (Goody, 2000: 1).

In the analysis that follows, I investigate how villagers have applied their literacy skills to the new courtship practice of love-letter writing in Junigau. I discuss the implications of the emergence of love-letter correspondences for social relations in Nepal and trace out the broader ramifications for conceptions of literacy, gender, love, social change, and agency (which I define as the socioculturally mediated capacity to act). My central argument is that a close examination of love-letter writing in Junigau reveals the microprocesses of social transformation as it is occurring. I contend that the new practice of love-letter writing in Junigau has facilitated not only a shift away from arranged and capture marriage towards elopement but also a change in how villagers conceive of their own ability to act and how they attribute responsibility for events – developments with potential ramifications that extend far beyond the realm of marriage and well past the Himalayas.

In addition to offering us valuable insights into the rapidly changing marriage practices in this one community, these love-letter correspondences also provide us with a deeper understanding of the social effects of literacy. While ‘the literate mode is inevitably seen to open up opportunities’ according to Goody (2000: 154), such a mode of communication can also impose new and unexpected constraints, expectations, and disappointments. The increase in female literacy rates in Junigau in the 1990s made possible the emergence of new courtship practices and facilitated self-initiated marriages, but it also reinforced certain gender ideologies and undercut some avenues to social power, especially for women. Thus, this study reminds us that literacy is not a neutral, unidimensional technol-
ogy, but rather a set of lived experiences that will differ from community to community.5

**From Love to Development – and Back Again**

In June 1992 Bir Bahadur, a 21-year-old man who at the time often sported flashy jeans, a gold chain, and a winning smile, wrote the following words in his first love letter to Sarita, whose long black hair, fashionable Punjabi outfits, and demure giggles had caught his eye:

Sarita, I’m helpless, and I have to make friends of a notebook and pen in order to place this helplessness before you. Love is the sort of thing that anyone can feel – even a great man of the world like Hitler loved Eva, they say. And Napoleon, who with bravery conquered the ‘world’; united it, and took it forward, was astounded when he saw one particular widow. Certainly, history’s pages are coloured with accounts of such individuals who love each other. In which case, Sarita, I’ll let you know by a ‘short cut’ what I want to say: Love is the agreement of two souls. The ‘main’ meaning of love is ‘life success’. I’m offering you an invitation to love.

At the time this letter was written, Sarita, a 21-year-old woman from the Magar village of Junigau, and Bir Bahadur, who was from another Magar village in western Palpa District, were both studying at the college campus in Tansen, the district centre. They had met only once very briefly two months earlier when he had sought her out to deliver a message about some books she wanted to borrow from a relative. That one brief encounter, however, was enough to prompt each of them to inquire about the other’s family, personal qualities, and marriageability. Two months later, Bir Bahadur sent his ‘invitation to love’, and when Sarita replied, a complex, tumultuous courtship ensued.

Courtships such as this one involving love letters became possible for the first time in the early 1990s as a result of increasing female literacy rates in the village. Since it was still not considered appropriate for young men and women to date or spend time alone together (though many managed to do so occasionally despite close parental supervision), love letters provided them with a way to maintain contact with their sweethearts. Love letters such as Bir Bahadur’s above not only kept young people in touch with one another, they also prolonged courtships, enabling the participants to get to know each other better. Moreover, the mere sending and receiving of love letters marked someone as a particular kind of person – a ‘developed’ (bikäsi) as opposed to a ‘backward’ (pichhyädi) individual, someone who was capable of creating a particular kind of companionate marriage with a ‘life friend’. Together, the two would try to create a future made brighter by love and by ‘life success’.

Although Sarita and Bir Bahadur were among the first young people in their villages to court through love letters, they were not by any means the first to experience romantic love. Indeed, expressions of romantic love in Junigau can be found in old folksongs, poems, and stories, not to mention in villagers’ narratives of elopements that occurred decades ago. And yet, Bir Bahadur and Sarita’s courtship differed in many respects from those of their parents’ generation. The few older Magars in Junigau who eloped rather than taking part in arranged or
capture marriages carried on extremely brief courtships, often eloping the day after meeting someone at a songfest or wedding. While these few elopements were frequently triggered by romantic love, and while romantic love sometimes developed between spouses who had had arranged marriages or capture marriages, most Junigau courtships that took place in the 1990s differed significantly from those that occurred in previous decades with regard to how romantic love was conceptualised. Whereas in the past, romantic love was considered an emotion of which to be embarrassed, in the 1990s, love came to be seen as desirable, as it was linked in many young villagers’ minds with development and modernity; indeed, desire itself came to be viewed as desirable – a phenomenon I explore at greater length elsewhere (Ahearn, 2003).

Not only did courtships leading to elopements look different in the 1990s; there were also many more of them in Junigau than there had been in earlier periods. The number of elopements rose steadily in the village during the last decades of the 20th century, whereas the number of arranged marriages and capture marriages declined (see Figure 1). More and more emphasis was placed on obtaining the woman’s ‘consent’ (mañjur) to the marriage. What this consent looked like in various types of marriage, how brides, grooms, and others felt about it, and how this consent affected villagers’ notions of action and responsibility, are explored in greater detail elsewhere (Ahearn, 2001a).

Figure 1 Women’s marriage types over time in the central ward of Junigau
Literacy Practices and Development Discourses

For the remainder of this paper, I attempt to situate Junigau love-letter writing in the wider range of literacy practices in which villagers engaged during the 1990s. By doing so, we can begin to discover some of the sources of the villagers’ new ideas about love, success, agency, and personhood.

By the 1990s, development discourse was ubiquitous in Junigau: textbooks, magazines and novels, Radio Nepal development programmes and soap operas, Hindi movies in Tansen, love-letter guidebooks, and everyday conversations. I focus here on the most salient written sources of development discourse and new ideas about agency. While it is also important to investigate the actual literacy practices surrounding reading and writing, as well as the viewing of films, and to explore how literacy practices in Junigau have changed over the past few decades, for the purposes of this article I will concentrate primarily on an analysis of the most widely read texts. Through such a close reading of these texts, we can discover some likely sources for the development rhetoric found in Junigau love letters.

All government schools in Nepal, including Junigau’s Sarvodaya High School (grades 1–10), use the same set of textbooks published by the Ministry of Education and Culture. When I taught English and Maths in the Peace Corps in the early 1980s, these were the textbooks I used, and they are the textbooks from which many of Junigau’s love-letter writers acquired their literacy skills in their early years of formal schooling. The themes that come through most clearly from the textbooks’ stories and pictures are (1) nationalism and development, which are presented hand in hand; (2) age and gender hierarchies; and (3) hegemonic Hinduism (see Figure 2). All the messages conveyed in Nepal’s national textbooks are important influences on Junigau’s constantly shifting structures of feeling. They both reflect and shape villagers’ changing notions of personhood, agency, and social hierarchy (cf. Luke, 1988, Schieffelin, 2000).

Similar themes underlie Nāyā Goreto (New Path), the textbook used to teach female literacy in Junigau and elsewhere throughout Nepal. The text and images in the female literacy materials through which many Junigau women have learned to read and write differ somewhat from those of the textbooks used for formal education in Nepali schools, yet there are interesting parallels. Like the textbooks used in all government schools in Nepal, Nāyā Goreto stresses the need to become ‘developed’ (bikāsi), but while the formal school textbooks emphasise hegemonic Nepali nationalism and Hinduism and reinforce existing gender and age hierarchies, New Path seeks to challenge at least some of those hierarchies. Interestingly, both the textbooks used in Nepali schools and New Path are government-sponsored textbooks, which proves that no government is univocal in its publications.

From page one, New Path, which is explicitly Freirean in design, is steeped in development discourse. From the vocabulary words accompanied by full-page illustrations designed to raise students’ consciousness to the serialised comic strip stories about villagers and their problems, the textbook clearly presents in unmistakably moral tones a correct – or ‘developed’ – way to live. Of course, the degree to which literacy students or other villagers who read these materials (for the workbook is in wide circulation in Junigau) accept, resist, or otherwise
grapple with this image of the bikāsi Nepali varies. The ideology of New Path is not absorbed passively or unquestioningly by its Junigau readers. Nor is it by any means the sole source of development discourse in the village. Tracing individuals’ actions and beliefs back to this particular text is therefore problematic, if not impossible. Nevertheless, I have heard Junigau residents use the comic strip stories as cautionary tales, especially regarding men with drinking problems and
multiple wives, or women who are dissatisfied with their fates and decide to leave their husbands (see Figure 3).

Where New Path has contributed the most to social change in Junigau and to the rhetoric found in love letters, it seems to me, is in its advocacy of the ideological package involving self-sufficiency, hard work, development, success, and individual responsibility. Many of the same messages are being communicated in Sarvodaya School’s textbooks and classrooms, albeit within a very different framework that emphasises patriotism, Hinduism, and filial piety. As Junigau residents acquire basic literacy skills, whether through formal schooling or evening literacy classes, they are encouraged to associate the acquisition of all kinds of skills with greater development, capitalist activity, independence, and agency. Jenny Cook-Gumperz recognises this process when she states, ‘Literacy as a socially defined phenomenon is constructed through a process of schooling’ (1986: 6).

Next to the textbooks used in the government school and in female literacy classes, the most popular reading materials in Junigau in the 1990s were magazines. Three main types were popular: (1) film magazines such as Kāmanā; (2) magazines such as Deurāli and Yuvā Manch, which focus on development, education, and entertainment; and (3) publications such as Lāphā and Kairan, which support the janājāti ethnic political movement.

Another type of reading material available to Junigau residents in the 1990s consisted of short stories or novels, but many fewer villagers actually read these materials because of their expense. They also lacked the appeal of magazines, which had more attractive graphics and prose that was easier for villagers to understand. The only work of fiction I saw in the village besides a few collections of folktales was a novel by Prakash Kovid (n.d.) entitled Love Letters. Although none of the letter writers with whom I spoke during my research had read the
book before they wrote their love letters, other young people in the village had, and the details of the plot were circulated fairly widely, as was the book itself.

Although most Junigau love-letter writers have told me that they write only what is in their hearts/minds (man) and have never consulted a guidebook, the examples, rules, and sentiments contained in the love-letter guidebooks that are sporadically available in bookstores in Tansen so closely echo Junigau love letters that I have decided to close with a few examples of these texts here.

When I first heard that ‘how to’ books were available to Nepalis who wanted to learn how to write love letters, I asked one of the clerks at Shrestha News Agency in Tansen for copies of whatever they had. Sorry, the clerk replied, they were all sold out. I returned a couple of weeks later, but although they had received a new delivery of the guidebooks in the interim, they were again already sold out. By my third trip to the bookseller, the clerk recognised me and gave me an apologetic smile that acknowledged what he must have perceived to be my desperate need to learn how to write love letters. Still no guidebooks. Finally, a few months later, I did manage to obtain a copy of Ara John Movsesian’s *How to Write Love Letters and Love Poems* (Movsesian, 1993) from Shrestha News Agency, though in all my subsequent trips back to the store they never had any of the popular Hindi guidebooks in stock. I found two more English guidebooks in Kathmandu bookstores, J.S. Bright’s *Lively Love Letters* (Bright, n.d.) and Manohar’s *Love Letters* (Manohar, n.d.).

In his guidebook, Movsesian puts forth the same philosophy of love that informs the Junigau love letters. According to this philosophy, love is an eternal centrality of life. At the same time, an evolution is posited that moves away from illiterate ‘backwardness’ towards ‘civilised, refined’ expressions of ‘Romantic Communication’. The following passages from Movsesian’s Preface demonstrate the parallels with the love letters written in Junigau and the ideological assumptions regarding the effects of literacy:

> Verbal language has enabled individuals to personally express their love in a more refined manner than was earlier possible. Written language has provided lover’s [sic] a very potent tool which, in turn, has given rise to two forms of Romantic Communication: The Love Letter and Love Poem. Both of these forms have been used by literate people everywhere for centuries to communicate their innermost passions, desires and emotions. Even Henry VIII and Napoleon wrote love letters to their sweethearts. The most famous legendary writer of love letters was Cyrano De Berjerac [sic] who wrote countless letters, not for himself, but on behalf of his close friends. (Movsesian, 1993: vii)

Similarities are immediately apparent between this passage from Movsesian’s guidebook and the first letter Bir Bahadur wrote to Sarita, quoted above, which contains the lines, ‘Love is the sort of thing that anyone can feel – even a great man of the world like Hitler loved Eva, they say. And Napoleon, who with bravery conquered the “world”, united it, and took it forward, was astounded when he saw one particular widow.’ Moreover, the very first letter in Movsesian’s book, in the section entitled, ‘Love Letters from the Past,’ is from Napoleon Bonaparte to Josephine De Beauharnais, written in December 1795. It reads in part:
I wake filled with thoughts of you. Your portrait and the intoxicating evening which we spent yesterday have left my senses in turmoil. Sweet, incomparable Josephine, what a strange effect you have on my heart! Are you angry? Do I see you looking sad? Are you worried? (Movsesian, 1993:7)

These lines are echoed in the many allusions to anger and sadness in the correspondence of Vajra Bahadur and Shila Devi. In the spring of 1990, for instance, Vajra Bahadur wrote, ‘Again, you’ll probably get angry reading this letter. Whenever I see you, you’re always angry. Why, oh why, when I see you walking, looking angry, does my heart get cut into slices?’

**Conclusion**

Although it is undeniably true, as Goody (2000: 155) states, that ‘Changes in modes of communication do matter and have fundamentally altered the life of mankind [sic]’, this statement begs the question of how things have changed, for whom, why, and with what results. As Schieffelin (2000: 293) reminds us, ‘We know that societies differ significantly in ways of taking up and organising literacy practices (or resisting them), and this relates to cultural as well as historical factors.’ In the case of Junigau, it is clear that ideology cannot be separated from literacy, as young villagers in the 1990s acquired literacy skills in the context of certain social forces that emphasised the importance of formal education as part of becoming ‘modern’ and ‘developed’.

Moreover, while some literacy practitioners and scholars might view the increasing rates of female literacy in a place like Junigau as an unmitigatedly positive outcome, as an example of ‘the giving of power to the powerless’ (Goody 2000: 158), my research indicates that literacy does not always bring with it power (cf. Luke, 1996; Street, 2001). A Junigau woman who uses her newly acquired literacy skills to write love letters that culminate in elopement with a young man often entirely forfeits the support of her natal family should the marriage turn sour. Having married someone she usually knows only through love letters, she may end up devastated when her husband is less loving in actuality than he sounded in his letters, or when his mother (for couples in Junigau always live with the husband’s extended family) is a harsh taskmaster over the new, lowly daughter-in-law – and when no one from her natal family will intervene on her behalf because she eloped rather than having an arranged marriage. That such distressing outcomes have occurred in Junigau belie the simplistic notion of literacy as a neutral skill of empowerment.

Finally, the types of ideological messages conveyed in the texts used in and out of Junigau classrooms, and the unexpected uses to which Junigau young people are putting their newly acquired literacy skills, should open our eyes to the need for a more thoughtful and more culturally specific approach to pedagogy in the context of literacy acquisition. Some might argue that since Junigau women are primarily, or even exclusively, using their literacy skills to conduct love-letter correspondences, perhaps love letters should be brought into female literacy classrooms as texts. Or perhaps the writing of love letters should be made central to the curriculum. And yet, my very strong hunch is that these suggestions would be rejected by the women who attend female literacy classes in Nepal, for they claim that they want a ‘real education’ – that is, they want to learn
to read and write using the same methods of rote memorisation and the same textbooks as their brothers used to acquire their literacy skills. Indeed, female literacy students in the 1980s and 1990s explicitly dismissed the New Path text’s Freirean goals of consciousness raising and social activism as irrelevant to their own goals of becoming ‘truly literate’. Despite the fact that these women would be applying their literacy skills to tasks quite different from those of their formally educated brothers, they nevertheless perceived that there was prestige in becoming literate via particular pedagogical methods in particular social contexts. Although the women attending evening female literacy classes were required to use the less prestigious New Path textbook and were instructed in ways that could be called more participatory or progressive, they realised that the literacy they were acquiring did not have the same social value as the literacy their brothers had acquired. All means to the end of literacy are not created equal. This is because, as Brian Street (2001: 8) notes,

engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset. The ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power. It is not valid to suggest that ‘literacy’ can be ‘given’ neutrally and then its ‘social’ effects only experienced afterwards.

In conclusion, while I have only managed to scratch the surface of the complexities involved in the Nepali literacy practice of love-letter writing, I hope I have nevertheless provided a glimpse of some of the ways in which these love letters are situated intertextually among other commonly read texts in Junigau, all of which are saturated with various development discourses. In addition, by situating the Junigau practice of love-letter writing in its historical, social, and intertextual contexts, I have presented one case study of the sometimes unexpected uses to which newly acquired literacy skills are put, and the many complex meanings and values associated with them. In so doing, I hope to have demonstrated the need for nuanced, fully contextualised analyses of literacy acquisition.

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**Notes**

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a panel organised by the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée’s Scientific Commission on Literacy, entitled, ‘Global and Local Issues in Literacy Research’, at the 13th World Congress of Applied Linguistics, 19 December 2002, Singapore.

2. Desjarlais (1992: 164) reports that the same adage is common among the Tibetan ethnic group with which he did his research. They end the saying with an additional phrase, however: *kasari dekhteko?* – which Desjarlais translates as, ‘How can it be seen?’. A similar belief in the writing of one’s fate on one’s forehead at birth is also prevalent in other
parts of South Asia. See Divakaruni (1999) for a novel about India based on this premise.

4. See Ahearn (2001b) for a review of the literature on language and agency.
5. For a sampling of literature on literacy practices, especially the approach known as New Literacy Studies, see Barton, et al. (2000), Baynham (1995), Collins (1995), and Street (1984, 2001).

6. ‘Bahadur’ is a common middle name for Magar men; it means ‘brave’. (‘Kumari’ and ‘Devi’, meaning ‘goddess’, are common middle names for women in Junigau.) Although most Junigau residents stated that they would not mind my using their real names in my ethnography or in my public presentations because the courtships described have long since resulted in marriage, in order to protect the few who asked for anonymity, I have used pseudonyms for all love-letter correspondents as well as for others who shared their narratives of marriage with me. I do not use composites or fictional characters, but I do omit or change minor details on occasion that would definitively identify someone. In keeping with anthropological convention, Junigau itself is also a pseudonym.

7. Words with quotation marks around them were written originally in English.
8. Akhil Gupta (1998) notes that colonial discourse ‘bequeathed a set of dichotomies that were unusually “productive” in a Foucauldian sense’ because they enabled the construction of a sociology built on them (Gupta, 1998: 9). That Junigau villagers themselves use such dichotomies as developed/backward or modern/traditional speaks to the complexities and ironies inherent in what Gupta calls ‘the postcolonial condition’. As Stacy Pigg notes, ‘Whether or not this [traditional/modern] dichotomy serves us well in social analysis, the fact is that these terms are thriving in the world we aim to describe and interpret. We need, then, to track the terms of the discourse of modernity as people adopt, deploy, modify, and question it’ (Pigg, 1996: 163–4). See also Collier (1997: 213) on how ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ are best seen as subtraditions of a wider post-Enlightenment European culture.

10. Grade 10 is the final grade of high school in most places. In some schools a ‘10+2’ system has been implemented, but not in Junigau.
12. See Freire (1972) and Freire and Macedo (1987).
13. The Nepali title, Prem Patra, could be translated as singular or plural. In the book there are numerous love letters exchanged between the young protagonists rather than one special love letter, so the more appropriate translation is probably Love Letters.
14. I was told that there are no love-letter guidebooks written in Nepali.
15. The author of this book uses only one name, ‘Manohar’.

References


