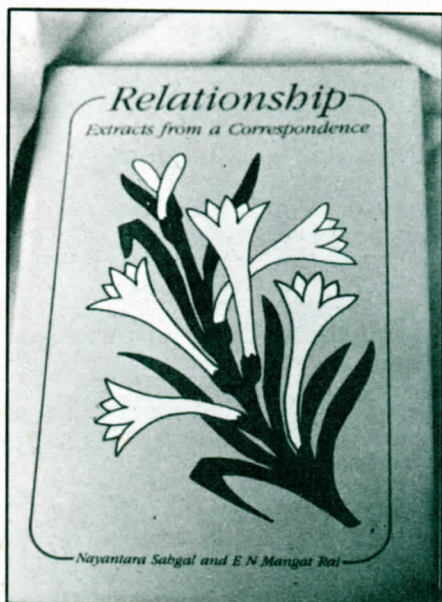


BOOK REVIEWS



RELATIONSHIP

Extracts From a Correspondence

reviewed by **Liddy Alejandro-Nacpil**

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It is rare to find someone with whom you feel free to be totally honest, with whom you are not afraid to be who you are, with whom you are able to share your feelings, thoughts, ideas and are understood and appreciated. Rarer still to find the other so passionately interested in getting to know everything there is to know about you, what and how you do, what you think, etc., from the most profound and beautiful to the most ordinary and mundane, not out of wanting to or presuming to possess, but as part of desiring the fullness of a relationship with the wholeness of a person. It is a beautiful relationship which combines love and friendship and makes possible such depth of trust and confidence, comfort, assurance, honesty, integrity and caring that brings out the best in people and allows the worst to be

revealed, understood, accepted and if necessary, also forgiven.

Perhaps many go through their lifetimes never having this chance, never knowing what it is like, never even imagining that it could be possible. The web of structures, cultures and norms that divide people and determine their relations, including love and friendships between and among men and women, whether individuals are conscious of these or not, alienate people from themselves and from each other, making it difficult to achieve wholeness and fullness of both being and relations. This is especially true for women, whose lives are mainly defined by roles – wife, mother daughter, single woman, married woman, widow; whose relationships with others are expected to be within the confines accepted behavior associated with the roles one is supposed to assume especially when it comes to relationships with men; whose worth are determined in terms of how they measure up to the standards and pattern of behavior associated with each role. Who you are, what you can be, is chopped up into little pieces that fit into these various roles, and pieces of you that does not get lost or submerged in the day to day effort to play your various roles. It is overwhelmingly difficult to affirm who are much less have a sense of your wholeness.

The letters between Tara and Bunchi chronicle a relationship that is precisely so special that it was pursued and sustained despite the pain and suffering it extracted from them both. The pain is not simply because they are not free to pursue it as freely and fully as they wish, but because they have already other commitments and roles both public and especially private that they are committed to honor and fulfill.

Tara, or Nayantara Sahgal, comes from a distinguished family in Indian society. She is the daughter of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, once a governor of Maharashtra, and a niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of India. More than this, Tara is a writer of several novels, political commentaries and non-fiction essays and articles. Bunchi, or E.N. Mangat Rai was a respected public servant until his retirement in 1971. Also an author and writer of several books in various capacities in the Indian Civil Service for over three decades including Chief Secretary for the most part of Pratap Singh Karon's tenure. Both Tara and Bunchi were married to other people. Tara is also mother to three children, who were of minor age when their relationship started.

Like many women, Tara was married to a man who had very traditional concepts and expectations of marriage and wife. Unfortunately, her marriage is a familiar story. Tara had a relationship including sexual with another man prior to their engagement and marriage. It was a source of deep resentment for Gautam, her husband and the cause of their first crisis and contributory to the bigger perpetual crisis in their marriage. She was deemed less valuable, even unworthy, because she did not come into marriage pure and virginal. The usual restrictions surrounding a married woman were further reinforced by this "past". The possessive nature of Gautam's attitude towards his wife was punctuated with bouts of violence whenever his fragile male ego was challenged and his claim to ownership of Tara was threatened. "Peace and harmony" prevailed only when Tara obediently complied with all the "duties" of a wife. To Gautam, as with many men, the measure of the health and happiness of marriage had to do with the fulfillment of his expectations and how neatly and well the marriage fell within the pattern of his life. the needs and expectations of the woman, his wife, either does not come

into the picture at all or are assumed to jive with his own. While he allowed for a certain freedom for Tara, this permitted freedom can only be intellectual in nature, enough only for her to pursue her vocation as a writer, and only enough so it does not threaten what he sees as her main reason for being – that of wife and mother – and the stability of their marriage as he sees how the institution should be.

Beyond the beauty, fierceness and strength of Tara's and Bunchi's relationship and their struggle to strain against the restrictions of their other roles and commitments, the letters are a story of Tara's struggle with her marriage. This struggle was a struggle by itself and not as an outcome of her relationship with Bunchi. It was a struggle with her own concepts and values about marriage vis a vis Gautam's. It was a struggle with the actual realities of their marriage. But all the more made intense and painful because of the threat Tara's relationship with Bunchi presented to Gautam, and the contrast it showed to Tara against the state of her marriage. It was a struggle all the more complicated as Tara tried to reconcile her effort to sustain her marriage with the pursuit of the other relationship, tried to bring some rationality to her actions. Bunchi seemed to have much less difficulty in reconciling her relationship with Tara with the reality of his marriage to someone else. Men usually seem to have less qualms about claiming happiness for themselves even if it may go against their other commitments. But it is touching to have genuinely felt Tara's pain as his, and how he was willing to restrict his happiness and the fulfillment of his needs for her own protection and safety.

In spite of Tara's anger and frustrations about her marriage, her recognition of the dehumanizing state which Gautam and the kind of marriage he insisted subjecting her to, and her identification of Gautam's flaws, she did not lose sight of his humanity. Part of her struggle was to try to understand him, even empathize with his pain, to be critical of her own weaknesses and mistakes which contributed to his behavior and the nature of their relationship. This echoes how many women are. This ability is at once a strength of women as well as what can sometimes hamper them from seeking freedom.

Coming back to the relationship between Tara and Bunchi, the letters depict not only its special nature but also the pressures it underwent. Such a relationship could not be celebrated openly, had to be hidden from society and more painfully from other loved ones and friends, can only be sustained on stolen time and space. Such a relationship could have easily been eroded by shame or guilt, could have easily been rendered ugly by society's unforgiving and prying eyes. Its strength is also expressed by the fact that it did not succumb. But then, one can also wonder that perhaps such relationships are not subject to the normal stresses, to the ordinariness, of day to day living that it can remain to be seen as always special. That perhaps in such relationships, one is never able to get enough of the other person and the relationship that it remains to always be so passionate.

The story in these letters on the surface is not extraordinary: two people trapped in unhappy marriages, forging and pursuing a relationship with each other from which they are able to fulfill needs their marriages cannot, a story of marriage and extramarital relationships. People are usually predisposed to passing simple judgements on such stories, from whatever perspective: traditional, feminist, conservative, liberal, progressive ... but this book shows you why one cannot, maybe should not.

The letters show that the authors must indeed be good writers. They are articulate, vivid, coherent, whether they are communicating ideas, random thoughts, describing their feelings, talking about ordinary situations in their lives or their major crises. One might sometimes experience some slight degree of difficulty in reading owing to the peculiarity of Indian English and references to events and contexts in Indian society. But the main reason why the book is not easy reading is because every so often one is made to stop and reflect.

Reading the book, one is not simply allowed to take a close look into the intimacies and problems of other people's lives, one is not simply an audience to their life situations as these are unfolding. The feelings, ideas, insights, experiences, particular anecdotes, joys and pains etched in these letters cannot but resonate with some aspects in our lives and in the lives of other people, other women we know. Tara and Bunchi's historical and cultural context, social and economic standing, family backgrounds and education of course define the parameters within which their problems and struggles are concretely shaped and pursued. But certainly there are human yearnings that are universal.▲

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