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STRUCTURES OF A LIVED-IN DISCOURSE

SARAH E. MILLER

I have organized this paper¹ around two remarks I heard in the field; what they have in common is that they both were understood as jokes by Nepalese listeners. I don't expect them to be funny in this context; laughter gets lost in translation more readily than most species of language. By the time we get to the second remark, however, you will probably know why they were funny to the Nepalese. I heard—or overheard—these remarks in the context of marriage negotiations among Hindu Brahmins in Kathmandu, Nepal. Both the jokes and this paper hinge on the meaning of the word “*ghar*” in Nepali: the word “*ghar*” offers a would-be pun-maker several definitions. “*Ghar*” can mean among other things “house” and also “family group”.²

Let me invite you in to the first story: while my Nepalese friends laughed at the incident, for me it was one of those moments in the field when everything you've been wondering about clicks into focus. In this case, I was visiting a family that was engaged in the very anxious process of negotiating a marriage for the eldest son of the eldest son. What made it worse was that their house was not finished. For years they had lived squashed into the only finished rooms which were on the bottom floor. The upper rooms were all bare cement, with no glass in the windows, and there was construction material all over the floor. As usual the conversation turned to marriage, and someone wanted to know how they could plan a marriage in a house that was only partly built. This quibble was dismissed; after all, said someone, the inside doesn't matter. They could just put paint on the outside and the wedding party wouldn't know the truth until they had crossed the threshold and then it would be too late (adapted from Fieldnotes).³

This fantasy of deception may not seem particularly funny; or worse, it may make my friends out to be somewhat dishonest, sitting around plotting the ensnarement of some poor girl. Some readers may be conversant enough with Nepalese Brahmin honor to know why it is funny and why it is acceptable as a joke and not just a comment made in poor taste. For one thing, the image of the house⁴ as all empty and impoverished on the inside, glitzy and seductive on the outside, is exactly the way other icons of honor are designed. For instance, around the time of serious planning for a marriage event, the women troop out to the goldsmith's place with their savings stashed invisibly about their person. In contrast to this concealed wealth, the ornaments that they order are masterpieces of deceptive display. Each piece is hollow and designed with elaborate knobs and corners that give it the illusion of incredible volume and weight. Of course, since every goldsmith uses basically the same designs, everyone knows about the empty space inside the spectacular piece, and they calculate the economic standard and the status accordingly. There is no malice about this deceit. In fact it wouldn't even be called deceit, it is simply part of the game of fashion and status.

The subjects of photographs insist on similar formalities; if possible, people wear only their very best clothes for photographs. In marriage negotiations, photos of the girl precede all other objects of exchange except the minimum of facts (such as name, father's occupation, place of residence). Of course, people know how photographs are designed, and they figure for the visual hyperbole when they calculate status from a photo. The remark about painting the outside of the house draws on this shared knowledge of studied illusions. This work of display and secrecy is quite conscious; the comic jolt comes from verbalizing it; the techniques of fashion are made public and faintly ridiculous.

Material accouterments of wealth do not however determine prestige. The calculation of honor depends on the stories people tell about what they saw; if they saw a beautifully painted three-story house, and managed out of some generosity or self-interest not to notice the empty, unfinished windows, then the family's symbolic capital⁵ includes the fabled mansion. The girl in the photograph acquires value as women whisper to each other that her sari was brought in from Hong Kong, or that the curtains pictured behind her show a house with great

“style”. They use, by the way, the English word “style”: it means economic standard but emphasizes the techniques of fashion. That is, one must not only command access to foreign goods, but also know how to wear the sari with accustomed ease, with the tail the right length and the folds hanging gracefully. The calculation of this symbolic value depends on the circulation of opinion. People’s reputations are made and broken in the marketplace of talk. I like to translate the word for prestige and honor (“*ijjat*” in Nepali⁶) as “reputation”, or even “repute” because these English words include the rhetorical dimension, that is, the circulations of talk⁷ on which honor depends.

Now, to bring us back to “*ghar*.” The connection is made across the concept of construction. People argue over the value of icons of prestige: one person will say the sari is French, and the honor meter goes up; another will say, but really, it’s an old style, at least ten years old, and the honor plummets again. The question is, which of these stories will circulate as the truth about the value of the sari? Honor is not given but constructed out of such talk. Now, a *ghar* or house in Nepalese terms is a perfect analogy for this kind of argument, because, like opinion, it can be built up, torn down, revised, added on to. Like opinion, a house can be shiny and appealing on the outside, concealing flaws and inadequacies on the inside.

Now there are two steps missing to this argument. Let me give them to you in quick sequence here: first of all, “*ghar*” is more than just a physical plant: the word also refers to a family’s identity; it means a group defined by place and historical continuity. This is also true in some English contexts: consider Edgar Allan Poe’s story “Fall of the House of Usher” (1965) in which a lineage ends as the last of the line dies and the house collapses inward into the swamp.

The second missing link is that family identity or *ghar* is symbolically constructed; it is not just a collection of names linked by birth and marriage, but a genealogy of related stories. These stories⁸ focus almost exclusively on marriage and on geographic movements; they include the narratives about sub-standard marriages in the family like cross-caste or runaway marriages; they also include the origin stories about the family’s first migration to the Valley, and stories about property exchange and the building of houses. Geography and stories are rhetorically dependent. If I was mediating a marriage, I would not be allowed to tell the histories of the family until I had located them geographically. I would have to lead them by the verbal hand through the nearby streets and up to the doorstep of the *ghar* in question before any information about family identity could be exchanged. So *ghar* is both a rhetorical catalyst or password to speech about a family, and it also refers to the vast symbolic store of happenings that defines a family. To complete and strengthen the analogy, these stories are subject to the same reconstruction that houses are; they are constantly altered for the purposes of honor and reputation. One puts tales of one’s family in the best possible light, just as one puts a fresh coat of paint on the house before marriage.

I was listening to one woman who was acting as mediator in a marriage. She had been going on to the boy’s mother in the usual way about how wonderful the girl was, how beautiful, docile, wealthy, etc. She finally broke this steady onslaught of praise to say that oh, by the way, the girl’s brother who lives in the house is real bad egg—a drug addict and a good-for-nothing. Oh well, says the boy’s mother philosophically: there’s always one corner (adapted from Fieldnotes). In English we would also use a house metaphor: we’d say that every family has a skeleton in the closet.

In 1988 an earthquake hit Nepal. Since houses have the doubled or trebled meanings I’ve discussed, the threat of collapsing houses all over Nepal carried the dual connotations of property destruction and the loss of honor. This brings us to the second joke, heard one evening as we sat around the warm TV. The show was a television mini-drama, about a house ruined (in Nepali “*bhalkieko*” by the drug habit of the eldest son. “Now everyone’s house is ruined!” said one woman (adapted from Fieldnotes).

It’s important to realize that houses are not related to stories as material reflection to verbal exchanges. Houses are not just useful symbols for a complex dialogical construction of history. For instance, one family read the earthquake as a threat to the oldest house in the compound, inherited from the grandfather’s generation. They disposed of the threat by tearing the house down themselves and planning reconstruction. Because the sons were the active agents, the entire sequence of events in fact represented an important shift

in power from the father's generation to the sons. This involved also plans about the sons' marriages, which would change the balance of power; marriages would begin to retire the father from family responsibility and recruit the sons. In this case, to tear down the house, and to put up structures in its place was to take control of family history, changing the structures of power and making way for new individuals (the daughters-in-law), whose stories would be like new rooms added on to present structures.

Rearranging or rebuilding a house during marriage negotiations is like fantasizing about the new member of the family. People evoke the imagined daughter-in-law by arranging a space for her in the physical plant. People much admired a relative in India who insisted on putting an addition on the house before he married off one of his children. It seems as if the new part of the house is like a spell that will invent a person to fit the space that evokes them.

I heard a brother teasing a younger sister one day about such fantasies. She was busy fixing up her father's new living quarters. Her heckler said she was really fantasizing about the glorious house her imagined husband would have; by acting it out in her father's house, he said, she hoped to make it come true in the next few years. Fantasies are more than casual dreams; they bring up the performative power⁹ of language, the power of what is said to construct reality. In Nepali, the word for this would be "*lāgcha*", to effect reality; it is used for curses, blessings and promises, among other things. Daydreams are more than trivial because they always tinker with the possibilities of coming true. The "non-real", like the "non-serious" (jokes for instance), enact a reality. They construct it out of nowhere and they put it into practice, just as the jokes I have breezed over have laid down the laws for some shared understanding to penetrate this space between us.

Let me end with a favorite story about how daydreams can, in the idiom of houses, invent a reality to be lived in. The story concerns the marriage of Siva and Parvati:

After the wedding Siva takes her to such a house! a bamboo house with spider webs and absolutely nothing inside. When Parvati sees this she begins to cry and Parvati thinks about how her father's house had been, and how she has ended up here. Then Siva does some hash, becomes intoxicated, and goes to sleep, saying that he is hungry and she should find him something to eat. But there was nothing at all in the house [to eat] so Parvati just sits there as if she was praying. Siva wakes up, and scolds her. He says there's no food because she's probably taken all the good food and eaten it herself. Parvati denies this, and said she too has gone without eating. Then Siva with a great thud! knocks the hut down, and there is a beautiful palace—he has looked in her mind and seen what she wanted and given her exactly that. (adapted from Fieldnotes)

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Notes

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² *Ghar*: house, building;- home;- family;- wife (Turner, 1980). The glossary for my Ph.D. dissertation was compiled by Shambu Oja, who relied mostly on Turner 1980 and occasionally other dictionaries). In some cases, as with “*ijjat*,” we used his definition. In other cases we used Turner’s definition. Since I was studying conversational language, the most accurate definition was that of a native speaker and teacher of Nepali, Oja, rather than a dictionary.

³ These designations refer to the fieldnotes. For the most part, fieldnotes were written on the day of the event or within about a week of the event. In most cases I wrote a short form of the notes if it looked like several days would pass before I could really write about what happened. Occasionally some time passed before I turned cursory notes into more elaborated prose.

⁴ Much creative anthropological energy has been devoted to the issues of the construction of space and place. De Certeau has theorized about space and place (1988); Boon addresses the organization of space and topography in Bali (1986); see also Leavy (n.d.), and Pigg (1992), (1990: this was her paper for this panel. I have not seen a text of it) and also an early draft of a chapter of her thesis (1990) that I was privileged to read; in South Asia, Daniel (1984) addresses the relation of place to identity; Ifeka (1987) addresses the structures of domestic place and their meanings; likewise, Bourdieu in Algeria (1976, 1977); Bishop’s *The Myth of Shangri-la* (1989) is a complex analysis of the construction of Tibet as a sacred place; Kapferer (1988) addresses nationalistic constructions of place. See also Littlejohn (1963).

⁵ I am drawing mostly on Bourdieu’s work for this concept of symbolic capital. See Bourdieu (1976, 1977); Poster (1988); and Shell (1978).

⁶ *Ijjat*: prestige, reputation, honour (Oja). Campbell argues that in a North Indian community respect is exchanged (1976: 101). In the context of this research, respect seemed to me to be not so much an object of exchange as an index of the quality and quantity of goods exchanged— capital, not property. Someone in Nepal told me that *ijjat* should be translated as “honor”. I also use “respect”, “prestige” and “reputation”. “Repute” may be the best translation, since it carries connotations of people’s words about others as well as prestige: first definition: “repute... BELIEVE, CONSIDER...”; second definition: “repute... 1: the character or status commonly ascribed to one: REPUTATION 2: the state of being favorably known, spoken of, or esteemed,” (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1983). See also Abu-Lughod’s interesting work on honor in Bedouin society (1986); Bourdieu (1977); Lindholm (1982); Gilson (1976).

⁷ Shell writes, “[b]oth coins and letters may be understood as symbols and also as material things,” (1978: 74). His work *The Economy of Literature* is a fascinating analysis that parallels my hypotheses about circulation, although his emphasis is on money rather than goods. Aside from Bourdieu (1977), Poster’s introduction to *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (1988) is a relevant text; see also, Raheja’s work (1988) on the transfer of inauspiciousness in India. On the subject of the circulation of stories, see also Leavy (1989); Spacks (1986); Haviland (1977).

⁸ I am grateful to Michael Leavy for many productive discussions on the subject of stories and story-telling in the everyday world.

⁹ I am drawing on Austin’s work on the performative (1975) and also Derrida’s interesting reading of that work (1977; 1977a).

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