



Arranged Marriage

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ABSTRACT

This poem, drawn from oral history interviews with my mother, a Kankana-ey woman from Bakun, Benguet, depicts her confrontation with *tomok*, an arranged marriage practice imposed on girls at a young age. Written in her voice, the poem captures her fears, silence, and act of resistance as she chooses to leave her ‘*ili*’ (community) and pursue her education. It illustrates the tension between cultural obligation and women’s aspirations within indigenous contexts. By portraying how women navigate gendered expectations and educational pursuits, the poem reveals that tradition does not uniformly silence women but can be negotiated through agency. This work contributes to gender and education discourse by foregrounding indigenous women’s lived experiences and the transformative role of education in resisting normative structures.

KEYWORDS

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As I swept our wooden floor, it creaked,
dust danced,
some slipping into cracks in the wood,
vanishing into the earth below.
Our floor is elevated, like the lives we live,
neither here nor there,
hovering between tradition and tomorrow.

I paused.
The creaking wood began to blend
with the murmurs of male elders
and the bark of the dog outside.

Then, my father called me.
I stepped out.
They were seated in a circle,
silent, purposeful,
and in the center,
a jar of *tapuy*,
glistening like a moon caught in a bowl.

An elder called his name, Damian,
the son of a well-spoken man.
He stood, smiling.
I remembered him when we were five,
how he helped carry our *pagey*,
how he helped my family during harvest.
He was kind then.

I had no idea what was happening,
only the sound of my own heart,
pounding,
as if I had run through all the mountains
in our village.

Then my father said the word,
Asawa.

It sank in,
just like it had for Sonya,
married to Donato
before she could finish school.

They were still talking,
but my ears turned deaf.
Thoughts raced through my mind.
I could not imagine
becoming a mother so soon.

I still had dreams,
college, the city,
my own path.

Tears welled,
rolled down
before I could stop them.

My mother was there too,
but she didn't say a word.
My siblings watched,
with wide, innocent eyes.

I did not move.
I only watched,
as the elders,
laughing happily,
stood and walked away,
their backs disappearing
into the dusk.

Background

This literary piece was born out of an oral history experience that seeks to contribute to a post-colonial historiography by recovering the “subaltern” voice of indigenous women within traditional communities. The poem is inspired by the real-life account of Dumngay, a Kankana-ey woman from Bakun, Benguet, whose life was shaped by the profound importance of land as the foundation of everyday survival. In the Kankana-ey context, the land is not merely property but a communal and ancestral lifeline; its protection and retention are the primary drivers of social organization. Consequently, when Dumngay's father initiated the practice of *tomok*, an arranged marriage custom often imposed on girls at a young age, his decision was a strategic response to these vital material conditions. He believed that marrying her into a respected and influential family was a necessary protective mechanism to secure her future and, more importantly, to safeguard her siblings from property and land disputes after his passing.

These land-based customs represent what Giddens (1984) terms ‘social structures’ that constrain choice; however, Dumngay’s flight to the city embodies the capacity to ‘act otherwise.’ In Giddens’ view, individuals are not passive recipients of these structures but are active agents capable of ‘acting otherwise.’ He defines agency as the capacity of an individual to alter their course of action at any point of their lives (Giddens, 1984). Dumngay vividly illustrates this capacity for agency through her resistance on the eve of her wedding ceremony, when she escaped to the city with nothing but her courage and eventually pursued and completed her formal education. This exercise of agency is what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe as the ‘chordal triad’ of agency, where actors draw on the past and future to navigate the present. She utilized the pursuit of education as a resource to renegotiate her identity beyond her *ili* (village), proving that indigenous women can transform their social reality even when their defiance is labeled a “grave sin” by their community. This framing challenges the external colonial gaze, the *pangkayo* perspective, that often portrays indigenous women as powerless or dismisses practices like tomok as irrational.

By situating the narrative within a post-colonial insider lens, tomok emerges as a complex cultural logic of protection rather than a simple act of patriarchal authority. This shift allows for a nuanced understanding of how women navigate power relations. As Fenella Cannell (1999) suggests, women often manage multiple roles while negotiating spaces of autonomy, yet Dumngay’s story is distinct in her successful resistance before the marriage could be finalized. This resistance is further complicated by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), as her subordination was reinforced by both her gender and a cultural structure demanding total obedience to elders. Ultimately, by portraying education as a transformative tool for self-determination, this work ensures that the lived realities and resistances of the indigenous are recognized as vital components of history, demonstrating that women are not silent followers of tradition but active agents of their own destinies.

Description

The poem narrates Dumngay’s experience during the tomok, an arranged marriage practice in the Kankana-ey community, and centers on her emotions at the moment when her future was decided by elders. I wrote the poem in the first person to embody her voice, her silence, and the confusion she felt as a young woman confronted with a decision she did not choose. In the poem, the jar of *tapuy*, a traditional rice wine placed at the center of the gathering, symbolizes consent and finality. In this context, drinking the tapuy signifies agreement, and once it is offered, the decision is understood as binding. The elders’ words are treated as ultimate, and obedience to them is deeply expected within the community.

The images in the poem, the creaking wooden floor, the murmurs of male elders, the jar of tapuy, and the disappearing dusk are not imagined scenes but were formed in my mind through years of listening to my mother’s stories. These memories were not shared in a single moment; they accumulated gradually from the time I gained consciousness as a child until now. Each retelling added detail, emotion, and meaning, shaping how I came to understand her experience.

As Dumngay's daughter, writing this poem was both an act of remembering and translation. Transforming her oral accounts into poetry allowed me to hold together memory, emotion, and culture in a way that prose alone could not. Through this work, I sought to honor her experience by showing both the weight of tradition and the quiet courage it took for her to imagine and choose a different path for herself.

Significance/Contribution to Gender and Education.

This poem contributes to the discourse on gender and education by highlighting how women's educational trajectories are shaped and resisted within culturally sanctioned practices like tomok. Rather than portraying indigenous women as passive recipients of tradition, the first-person voice of Dumngay reveals how silence and hesitation become early sites of negotiation within unequal power relations. While scholars like Fenella Cannell (1999) argue that women continuously negotiate power within parent-arranged marriages, Dumngay's experience is distinct because her negotiation and resistance occur prior to the finalization of the institutional arrangement.

Within this context, education emerges not merely as a personal aspiration but as a transformative resource that enables women to imagine alternatives and "act otherwise" (Giddens, 1984) beyond prescribed roles. Her desire to finish school and move to the city directly challenges homogenizing portrayals of indigenous women by showing how access to education can reshape social realities.

Methodologically, transforming oral history into poetry serves as a vital pedagogical text for gender and education studies. Because traditional indigenous knowledge and education are inherently transmitted orally, the poetic form honors this cultural mode of transmission. It captures the silences, interruptions, and emotional weight often absent in conventional academic prose. By situating an indigenous woman's struggle within the dynamics of cultural authority and negotiated agency, the work invites readers and educators to reflect on how oral testimonies can disrupt and enrich written histories of women's education across diverse settings.

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Statements and Declarations

- 1. Funding details.**

No funding was provided by any agency for this work.

- 2. Disclosure statement.**

The author declares no financial or non-financial interests and no competing interests. The author has not been involved in any sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, or abuse (SEA) complaint, allegation, or conviction.

- 3. Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing**

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to improve clarity and language. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content carefully and takes full responsibility for the final version of the work.

4. **Acknowledgement:**

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5. **Ethical Approval:**

This study involved oral history and personal narratives. The author obtained informed consent from the participant, and no formal ethics approval was required.

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Bionote

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