



Representation of Ethnic Women in Upendra Subba's *Lāto Pahāda [Dumb Hill]*

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Abstract

*The article aims to examine the images of ethnic women in Upendra Subba's *Lāto Pahāda [Dumb Hill]*, a collection of short stories. The focus of the article is to analyze the portrayal of female characters in the selected five stories from the collection and to explain how they subvert the image of the ideal woman promoted by mainstream Nepali literature. These stories deal with the issues of Limbu people, an ethnic community residing in the eastern hilly region of Nepal. Through them, Subba raises the issues of ethnicity and representation of marginalized people. He explores the pain, suffering and hardship of these people who have been at the margin of the society. The stories, mostly, focus on men who play the primary roles in them; nonetheless, female characters play an important role to make sense of the lifestyle of the Limbu people. Portrayed in the secondary roles as wife, daughter, and mother to the male characters, they maintain equal relation with their male counterparts. They work with self-determination and do not experience male domination in their lives. To analyze the issues stated above, this paper draws theoretical ideas from third wave feminism which rejects the universalist claim that all women share a set of common experiences. The third wave feminists deny the concept of universal femininity; they clarify that the forms of oppression can be as varied just as resistance to them can have specific local color. The finding of the article suggests that Subba's female characters are depicted in the ethnic background which is nonhierarchical and believes in gender equality. Their portrayal subverts the image of ideal womanhood created and circulated by mainstream Nepali literature.*

Keywords: *Ethnicity, mainstream literature, ideal womanhood, representation, third wave feminism*

Introduction

The issue of ethnicity and representation emerged in Nepali political scenario in the decade of 1990s. Heterogeneous communities of people, who speak different languages and practice different cultures, reside in Nepal. But till then, it had been recognized as the state of Nepali *jāti*. This Nepali *jāti* is synonymously used to indicate Nepali speaking people residing in the hilly region of Nepal, typically the Khas-Aryan.

Nepali people who speak languages other than Nepali found this identity as exclusive. Besides, the state endorsed Nepali language as the official language and the language of learning in 1959. The state's endorsement of Nepali language as the language of bureaucracy and education, systematically deprived the *ādivāsi/ janajāti* (ethnic people) people who "are not a part of the Hindu Varna system" and who speak different languages as their mother tongues (NEFIN 1) from making their representation in executive, legislative and judiciary sections of the nation. The ethnic people, then, started demanding that the state should address the diversity of the nation.

This imposition of one language and culture as the national language and culture of the nation promoted hegemony of a few powerful elites who have been controlling "every section of the government: executive, legislative and judiciary" (Dolpo 64). The ruling elites, as Bal Gopal Shrestha points out, came with the slogan: "One nation, one language, one religion, and one culture" in favour of the Bahun Chhetri community, their language (Nepali), their religion (Hindu) and their culture" (201). Manju Shree Thapa, a Nepali diasporic writer, also postulates that languages other than Nepali have been systematically sidelined through government policy after 1960. "Declared Nepali's sole official language in 1959, the Nepali language was deployed . . . as an instrument of National unification and cultural assimilation over a heterogeneous, multilingual populace" ("Translation Issue," para. 5). Because of this, ethnic people of Nepal complain that they have been lagging behind in education and in other meritocratic competitions.

The ethnic activists object to the endorsement of Nepali language as the language of learning and bureaucracy at the cost of other languages. Their discontent with the state indifference towards their cultures and languages gave birth to the Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasangh or Nepal Association of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN). According to David N. Gellner in the initial stage there were just seven members in the organization; but the number grew to 59. He argues that since 1990 the issues of ethnicity and identity became vibrant. It has been "a time of ethnicity-building. New identities have been forged, new organizations set up, and new claims made; everything is still in a state of considerable flux" (1823). Ethnic people started asserting their identities and claimed for proportionate representations of their community in every sector of the government.

The issues of ethnic identity and representation of ethnic people in the state's mechanism was accelerated by the Maoist Movement (1996-2006). Feizy Ismail and Alpa Saha assert that "the Nepali Maoists made major advances by incorporating historically oppressed peoples, including indigenous people, Dalits and Madhesis, as collaborators in the revolutionary struggle" (114). Shyam Thapa Magar agrees that the oppressed ethnic communities were supported by the Maoist Movement. He claims, "This made a new path for indigenous ethnic groups to work collectively demanding equal access over the state resource" (68). Maoist War, thus, boosted up the issues raised by ethnic people by incorporating the issues of ethnicity and representation as one of their agendas.

Along with the issues of identity, Maoist Movement raised the issues of gender. For the first time in Nepali history, during the war, Nepali media featured valiant ethnic women triggering bullets with their focused eyes. Rahel Kunz and Archana Thapa claim that participation of Nepali women in the war changed the image of Nepali women as weak and vulnerable to exploitation. They observe:

This led to a new trope of the fierce combatant that moved grassroots Nepali women from victimisation to empowerment. This trope depicts women combatants as fierce, brave, selfless and willing to be martyrs, carrying guns and fighting alongside their male comrades. Such depictions influenced the perception of women in Nepal. (401)

The War changed people's perception of Nepali women and their roles in the society. Previously, they were limited to domesticity and considered to be fit for nurturing and caring jobs. But now they have been recruited in the Nepal Army, an exclusively male domain till 2004.

The issues of identities and representation raised in the Nepali politics have affected Nepali literature as well. Writers from both ethnic and mainstream communities have been portraying female characters whose portrayal defies the stereotypical depiction of women as weak and vulnerable. For example, Krishna Dharawasi in his award winning novel, *Rādhā* (2006) portrays its female protagonist as a militia who judiciously launches war against her enemy. Indira Mishra posits that the novel "emphasizes the independence of women" and the reconstruction of their identity ("Evolution" 48). Yug Pathak in his *Urgenko Ghoda* portrays an ethnic female character as the protagonist of the novel whose portrayal defies the "traditional norms of femininity" (Mishra, "Redefining Femininity" 58). Rajan Mukarung's Madan Puraskar winning novel *Damini Bhir* is an exemplary one in this initiation. The author admits that it is written in the "Mundhun rhythmic style" which is the style that the author's community speaks (Bajracharya, para. 13). These writers have attempted to represent the diversity of Nepali society through their literary creations. They aim to address the issue of inclusiveness in Nepali literature from a gender perspective as well.

Moreover, writers from the ethnic community started a movement known as 'Srijanshīla Arājaktā' (Creative Anarchism) in 1999, as "a literary movement that questioned mainstream Nepali literature's inclusivity" (Bajracharya para. 3). Mukarung explains the need of the movement:

We aimed to bring the culture, philosophy and lifestyle of Rai, Limbu and Janajatis to mainstream literature. Because, as readers, even in academic books and popular literature books that people recommended as must-reads to each other, our identities' narratives were missing in those stories, our experiences had no mentions—the result was a generalised Nepali identity, pushing our community further down. And this wasn't just about our representation; it was about the need to work on literary works that accepted diversity. (Bajracharya, para. 8)

The movement aims to resist the mainstream Nepali literature which the members have identified as exclusionary. Thapa argues that Nepali literature is largely used to refer to literature of Nepal but that includes literature written in Nepali language. She claims that the canon of Nepali literature overwhelmingly consists of Nepali-language literature ("Translation Issue," para. 1). The classics of Nepali literature promote the culture and language of a particular community disregarding the diverse cultures of the nation. These texts rarely deal with the issues of ethnic people, their fascination, likes and dislikes. Thus, the members of the movement as creative writers started representing the issues of the Rai, Limbu and other ethnic communities to mainstream literature.

Hangyug Agyat, one of the initiators of the movement Creative Anarchism claims that the followers of the movement want to reflect the variant identities of Nepali society. Since Upendra Subba is one of the founding members of this movement, it is relevant to analyze *Dumb Hill* to find out how are ethnic women represented in his work. Most of the stories, set in the eastern hilly region of Nepal, where the Limbu community resides, portray Limbu people as the main characters of the stories. They deal with the issues of Limbu people, their culture and tradition. The stories explore the hard life of Limbu people who have been at the margin of the society. These people suffer from poverty and illiteracy because of the repressive policy of the nation (Rai, "Plight of Marginalized" 60). Subba through the stories explores how the Limbu community of Nepal suffers because of the exclusionary policy of the nation. To highlight the lifestyle of the Limbu people, he has chosen male characters as the main characters of the stories. Though the focus of the stories is Limbu men and their life experiences, female characters also play an important role in them. Thus, this article aims to explore the representation of ethnic women in the text.

The movement Creative Anarchism initiated by Rajan Mukarung, Upendra Subba and others demanded that the mainstream Nepali literature should provide space for the marginalized people. The initiators of the movement protest the marginalization of issues of ethnic people in the mainstream Nepali literature. The question, how are women represented in the literary creations of the practitioners of Creative Anarchism has triggered me to analyze Subba's text. Since most of the characters of the stories are Limbu people, this article will help to understand the representation of ethnic women in Nepali literature by ethnic writers, in general, and in Subba's stories in particular. It will also be beneficial to understand the position of ethnic women in the writing of one of the writers from the ethnic community.

In the process of analysis the article seeks answers to the following research questions.

- 1) What are the images of ethnic women in Subba's stories?
- 2) How do the images of ethnic women in the selected stories subvert the notion of femininity envisioned in the mainstream Nepali literature?

Identity Politics and Nepali Literature: A Review of Literature

The issues of ethnicity and representation emerged in Nepali Politics during the 1990s. Gellner mentions that in Nepal "it is a largely taken-for-granted fact of life that everyone has a caste or ethnic identity." He observes that from 1960 to 1990 the era of Nepali history is known as the era of Nation building. Until then people believed in all Nepali. But since 1990 the issues of ethnicity and identity became vibrant. It has been "a time of ethnicity-building. New identities have been forged, new organizations set up, and new claims made; everything is still in a state of considerable flux" (1823). This issue of ethnic identity was accelerated by the Maoist Movement (1996-2006). Maoist made the issues of representation as one of their major agendas.

Along with issues of identity, Maoist raised the issues of gender. For the first time in Nepali history, during the war, Nepali media were covered with ethnic women triggering bullets with their focused eyes. These issues affected Nepali Literature as well. Weena Pun talks to Khagendra Sangroula, a literary analyst and writer about the changes in Nepali literature. Sangroula points out the impact of Maoist movement in post-2006

Nepali Literature: "Post-2006, indigenous and historically-oppressed communities are demanding their rights, on the streets and in the media. This seems to be moving the epicentre of Nepali literature away from Kathmandu and the Bahun-Chhetri community to indigenous communities and their issues. Even within the indigenous groups, it is the Rai and Limbu writers who have come to the forefront" (para. 8). Nonetheless, he confesses that until now writers from the Brahmin and Chhetri community dominate the literary scene of Nepali literature. He estimates more than 80 percent of Nepali writers belong to the same community (para. 6). Yug Pathak insists that the poetics of Nepali literature should be changed. The mainstream Nepali literature is exclusionary for it does not represent the voice of ethnic and other marginalized communities of Nepal (189). Krishna Khanal, a political analyst, agrees that Nepal is a multi-cultural, multilingual and multi-ethnic nation. It is the beauty of the nation. But the mainstream Nepali literature rarely reflects the diversity of the nation (7). So, the demand of inclusiveness became pertinent in Nepali literature.

Growing with identity consciousness, creative writers from the ethnic community started the movement Creative Anarchism to resist the mainstream Nepali literature which they have identified as exclusionary. Rajan Mukarung, Hangyug Agyat and Upendra Subba are the prominent members of this movement. Agyat claims that the practitioners aim to represent the cultural diversities of Nepali society through their creations (53). Rajan, the major founding member of the movement, protests the mainstream Nepali literature that promotes the language and culture of one class of people who have been at the center of power ever since the creation of modern Nepal. He asserts that multi-cultural aspects are the beauty of the nation ("PatrāSangai"). So, Nepali literature should encompass the diversity of the Nepali society. Abhi Subedi, a prominent literary critic from Nepal, approves that Mukarung has been in the process of making ethnic poetry. He points out the ideological resistance of ethnic communities has influenced the literary creation of these ethnic writers. He appreciates the paradigm shift brought to Nepali poetry by them (22). He identifies the issues of marginalized people, women and Dalits in their poetry.

Writers from both ethnic and mainstream communities started portraying female characters whose portrayal defies the stereotypical depiction of women as weak and vulnerable. For example, Pathak in his *Urgenko Ghodā* [*The Horse of Urgan*] (2005) portrays an ethnic female character as the protagonist of the novel and brings the issues of ethnic people, i.e., the Tamang community to the fore. So do the other writers. According to Hrishiraj Baral, Mukarung's "*Damini Bheer* and *Hetchhaakuppaa* raise the issue of Kirant culture and ethnic identity," the identity of those people who have been marginalized by the state (403) Likewise, Mukarung in his *Hātā Jāne Aghillo Rāta* [*The Night before the Market Day*] deals with the issues of women from ethnic, Dalit and marginalized communities. His female characters protest the notion of ideal womanhood envisioned and promoted by mainstream Nepali society (Mishra, "Feminist Voice" 51). Their writings resist the homogenization of the diverse culture of the nation.

Mahesh Paudel, a poet and critic from Nepal points out that there has been a paradigm shift in literature both in the content and style in the Nepali literature. He explains:

Much of the vocabularies in literature today are absent in a classically developed academic lexicon. . . What was once known as 'pariskarvad' and

understood as an ideal approach toward literary refinement is today understood as a clumsy, centralist and limiting approach that discouraged the carnivalesque nature of human language. (para. 5)

Likewise, Mukul Dahal observes: "Village life, life in Kathmandu and Darjeeling, the lives of women in a male-dominated society, caste, class, and ethnic relations, . . . have been the recurring themes of Nepali short stories" (para. 2). Nepali literature has embraced the notion of inclusiveness.

Subba's *Dumb Hill* also supports the movement, Creative Anarchism. It represents the different cultural aspects of the Limbu community of Nepal. Jiwan Kumar Rai explains that *Dumb Hill* presents the "issues of marginalized groups; specifically it explores pains and sufferings of marginalized Limbu people such as illiteracy, poverty, hardships, oppression, exploitation, and alienation" ("The Representation of Limbus" 97). Most of the stories in the collection, set in the eastern region of Nepal, where the Limbu community reside, focus on the issues of ethnic people.

The review of literature on the issues of ethnic identity in Nepali literature provides no specific writings that deal with the issues of ethnic women in them. So far as my knowledge is concerned, no writing deals with the portrayal of ethnic women in the text. Thus, this study aims to fill the existing research gap, though partially.

Theoretical Perspective

This article is based on the qualitative mode of research writing. For the study, I have chosen five stories from Subba's *Dumb Hill*. They are "Kungkhāra Bhāle" ["The Deadly Rooster"], "Sasurālī" ["In-laws"], "Thote Sāilo" ["The Toothless Sāilo"], "Handaneko Bihe" ["Handene's Wedding"], "Hariyo Dhungā" ["The Green Stone"] and "Manamāyā" ["Manamaya"]. These stories form the primary source of information for the analysis. Other cross references that deal with the issues of identities and representation form the secondary information for the study. To analyze the images of ethnic women, and to explain the way the images of ethnic women subvert the notion of femininity envisioned by the mainstream Nepali literature, this research centers on the rhetoric of third wave feminism which believes on individual experiences as testimony to understand women's problems. Relevant extracts from the selected stories will be analyzed and interpreted from the third wave feminist perspective. Since the primary text is in Nepali version, I use transliteration and free translation of the selected extracts.

Third wave feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Judith Butler and many other postcolonial feminists and feminists of color called for a new subjectivity. They sought to negotiate the prominent space within feminist thought for consideration of multiple female subjectivities related to race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and location. The third wave feminist critics deny the essential definition of femininity for it universalized and over emphasized only the experience of upper middle class white women, thus, reproducing only Eurocentric perspective. Defying the concept of universal femininity they clarify that the forms of oppression can be as varied just as resistance to them can have specific local color.

Judith Butler's 1990 book, *Gender Trouble* criticizes the distinction drawn by previous feminisms between (biological) sex and (socially constructed) gender. Butler argues that one's gender is not inscribed in one's body rather s/he achieves her gender by repeatedly performing it. She claims that gender comes to existence through

performance. She explains that one learns gender by observing a series of cues which one internalizes in the process of socialization and then repeats over time. Butler argues that since gender is a learned activity, it can be unlearned or can be performed differently. She explains, "There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). She means to say that one's gender identity is not fixed and immutable rather it varies according to the time and situation.

Mainly, Black feminist theory is about liberatory speech and action that relieves and dismantles societal structures that dehumanize and silence Black women. bell hooks states that education then has to be 'the practice of freedom' for Black people making "the world more rather than less real, one that enables us to live life fully and freely" (*Talking Back* 72). She argues that theory should help people solve real life problems. She questions the relevance of those theories that fail to address the day to day problem of ordinary people. She interrogates:

As feminist activists we might ask ourselves of what use is feminist theory that assaults the fragile psyches of women struggling to throw off patriarchy's oppressive yako. We might ask ourselves, of what use is feminist theory that literally beats them down, leaves them stumbling bleary-eyed from classroom setting feeling humiliated, feeling as though they could be stanting in a living room or bedroom somewhere naked with someone who has seduced them or is going to, who subjects them to a process of interaction that humiliates, that stripes them of their sense of value. ("Theory" 5)

For black feminists daily life stories become part of the knowledge and sharing aspect of community is important in writing.

Subba as an initiator of Creative Anarchism protests the assimilation or exclusion of marginalized people by mainstream Nepali literature. The movement claims for inclusiveness in Nepali literature. Subba's *Dumb Hill*, as most of the stories are set in the Limbu society, deals with the Limbu culture. Most of the characters are Limbu people. Thus, I want to explore the images of women in them to examine in what ways his portrayal of female characters subvert the notion of ideal femininity envisioned by the mainstream Nepali literature, which has been alleged as being patriarchal written from the perspective of Brahmin and Chhetri males.

Subba has depicted the female characters in the ethnic background which is nonhierarchical and believes in "gender equality (or rather women enjoying more advantageous positions) – rather than social, economic and religious subordination of women" (Dolpo 67). He provides images of active, lively and physically strong women who act with self-determination. They do not showcase the traditional feminine attributes like shyness, submission, demure, modesty and courtesy in their activities. The notion of third wave feminism then fits to analyze the images of ethnic women and examine whether these images subvert the notion of ideal womanhood found in mainstream Nepali literary texts.

Images of Ethnic Women and Subversion of the Ideal Womanhood in *Dumb Hill*

The article aims to analyze the representation of ethnic women in five of the stories from Subba's *Dumb Hill*. Subba is one of the ethnic creative writers from Nepal who demands inclusiveness in literature. He identifies the mainstream Nepali literature

or the classics of Nepali literature, mostly written by and for the upper castes Brahims and Chhetries, as exclusionary. These literary texts, primarily written from the perspectives of upper caste males, rarely address the issues of the ethnic people, women and the underprivileged people. The ethnic people and women have less representation in such texts and even if they are represented they are stereotyped. Thus, the thinkers and practitioners of Creative Anarchism protest the mainstream Nepali literature and write from the perspective of the marginalized people. Subedi approves that issues of marginalized people, women and Dalit dominate the poetry of ethnic writers like Rajan Mukurang, Upendra Subba and Hangyug Agyat (22). Their primary aim then is to represent the cultural varieties of Nepali society and then protest the mainstream culture of the Nation, which they believe is exclusionary.

Subba's *Dumb Hill* foregrounds the culture of marginalized people. Set in the eastern hilly region of Nepal, where mostly the Limbu people reside, the text deals with the issues of these people. They explore the lifestyle and culture of these people and subvert the mainstream Nepali culture. Narrated from the third person points of view, most of the story incidents are seen from the perspectives of the male characters, who belong to the ethnic community, and are the protagonists of these stories. Written from the ethnic men's perspectives, these stories deal with their social, economic, psychological and sexual problems. Though these are males' stories, the female characters, despite their secondary roles, play important roles to highlight the issues of ethnic people and subvert the mainstream tradition of Nepali literature.

Like the literature of other patriarchal societies, the mainstream Nepali literature also promotes the stereotype images of women. It promotes the images of silent, submissive and sacrificing women with rare or no personal desires. As paragons of beauty and virtues, they are soft, sweet, loving and caring. This is the very image prescribed by the first modern Nepali novel *Rūpmatī* (1991) by Rudra Raj Pandey (Mishra, "Evolution" 1). Rajendra Subedi, a renowned critic of Nepali novels, postulates that Rupmati, the protagonist of this novel is the epitome of ideal womanhood (54). *Rūpmatī* sets the trend of writing realistic novels in Nepali literature and Nepali novelists after Pande promote the notion of ideal womanhood exemplified by Rupmati, the protagonist of the novel (Pradhan 426). But Subba's female characters do not fit the notion of ideal womanhood envisioned by mainstream Nepali literature. Portrayed from the ethnic perspective, the images of ethnic women in the selected stories subvert the feminine stereotype.

The female characters in *Dumb Hill* differ from the image of ideal woman imagined and promoted by the main-stream Nepali literature. They demonstrate both feminine and masculine traits in their behavior. They do not limit themselves in traditional feminine roles like nurturing, caring and accomplishing the domestic chores. The way they perform their gender comes closer to Butler who argues that how one demonstrates his/ her gender depends not on the personal choices of the individual rather one performs gender roles "within cultural situations or as a response to a set of norms" Individuals' "agency is constrained by culture and what I can do is, to a certain extent, conditioned by what is available for me to do within the culture and by what other practices are and by what practices are legitimizing" (345). The women in the text are straight forward, active and laborious. Some of them are aggressive, quarrelsome, tricky and manipulative. But at the same time they are humble, benevolent, lively and warm.

Their activities do not conform to the feminine gender associated with women. However, none of them are portrayed as problematic from the perspectives of the Limbu culture which dominate the stories.

Butler argues what an individual does as a gender being, depends on a "set of norms that regulate how gender is performed" (25). The female characters perform their gender roles in the background of Limbu culture, which appears non-hierarchical from the feminists' perspective. Feminists believe that the Western culture is hierarchical in which male and masculinity are prioritized to female and feminine (hooks, "Theory" 1). Helen Cixous argues that women's place in the history of Western thought has been at the negative pole of binary oppositions like father/mother, sun/moon, culture/nature, day/night, activity/passivity and so on. These binary oppositions, she posits have structured that history. She explains that all of the couple "come back" to the couple "man/woman," and also relate to another couple like philosophy/literature. All these pairs show the feminine side negative and powerless (287-88). Nepali society, guided by orthodox Hinduism, is also based on this dualism. Accordingly, a Hindu woman is expected "to be patient, obedient, and submissive to their husbands" (Mukherjee 145). But Subba's female characters defy this expectation from women.

"Kungkhāra Bhāle" ["The Deadly Rooster"], features a poverty stricken Limbu woman whose portrayal defies the traditional notion of womanhood. A mother of two children, she is identified as Birkhekī Swāsni (Birkhe's wife) and Makhakkekī Aamā [Makhake's mother]. Lively, expressive and aggressive, she is coarse and of short tempered. But at the same time she is humble, considerate and warm. She feels humiliated and insulted seeing her children waiting at the threshold of her neighbor's house being lured by the aroma of cooked meat. They were waiting there eagerly hoping to have a few pieces of meat. Their activities annoy her; she felt insulted. So, she beats them for not controlling their love for meat. She fails to showcase motherly affection.

Birkhe's wife image contradicts the image of a passive and helpless woman. Despite being poor, she is a highly self-esteeming lady. She critically analyzes the situation and attempts to cope with the adverse situation. She recalls that her family has been unable to feed the children with meat ever since Dashain (the greatest festival of Nepali people). She understands her children's genuine desire for meat because Limbu's cuisine includes meat and they enjoy eating it. Bhanubhakta Sharma Kandel asserts that the largest portion of Kirat people cuisine comprises of flesh" (25). However, she refrains from self-blaming and criticizing her husband for failing to meet the basic needs of the family. She does not depend on him as the head of the family. Besides, she shows no humility and respect to her husband who has just come to home working in the field. Her activities are unacceptable for an ideal woman, who is expected to be loving and kind, soft spoken with even temper. Contrarily, she loses her temper and scolds her children:

māsu khancha re. teskeemālāi cheparī tāchera pakāidui jasto. asatī . . . sikārī komā māsu pakāudai raicha. sikārīko sanghāra kukurajasto rungibasekā raichan. [He says that he wants to eat meat. Bad ones, as if I could peel my calf and cook for them. The devil! Meat was being cooked in Sikari's house. They were waiting at their door like the dogs.] (18)

She uses slang and curses her kids. Her manner defies the notion of decency and humility attached to the ideal woman. Her image stands in stark contrast with the image of a loving and affectionate mother. Instead of fondling the children, she chastises them.

Birkhe's wife is decisive, independent and assertive. She treats her husband as her equal and interrogates him: "*Kelāi ni pheri?* [For what?"] He responds to her: "*Bhāle becna hatyā lāne* [to take the cock for sale in the market]" (19). She objects to him saying that the cock is her personal property. Her response to her husband also violates the role of a good wife practised in the mainstream Nepali culture that treats husband as the master of the family who controls the resources. In the mainstream Nepali society, among the Chhetri- Brahmin, the wife is seen as her husband's junior who should respect and obey him [Bennett 174]. But Birkhe's wife denies when he tells her that he wants to sell their extraordinary rooster. Birkhe, being compassionate towards the children, decides to sell the rooster and buy a kilogram of pork and other ingredients from the money. However, he needs to take consent from his wife. Hence, he affectionately convinces her: "*lāṭi pakhanā. terai chāurā chāurīlāi māsu khāna diu bhnera* [You dumb, just wait. I just want to feed your puppies with meat]" (19). She lets him sell the rooster. It shows her love for her children, though she lacks motherly affection. Likewise, when Birkhe fails to make the right decision while bargaining for his rooster in the market, and returns without selling it, she immediately tells him that the customer has offered the appropriate price. When the kids insist on having meat, she allows her husband to butcher it. She acts confidently and decisively.

Birkhe's wife's image differs from the stereotype image of a wife and mother desired by patriarchy. Nonetheless, her harmonious relation with Birkhe and the story's sympathetic tone towards her justify the normativity of her role as a wife and mother. Butler reasons, "People who fail to do their gender correctly, or do it in ways that accentuate its genealogy and construction, are punished by culture and laws" (273). Since Birkhe has a smooth relationship with his wife, and he does not find her manner offensive and disrespectful, her activities are normal from the ethnic perspective. It can be interpreted that Limbu women need not be docile and submissive to confirm their feminine identity. As females they can be commanding and assertive.

Khoksung's wife, the major female character of "*Sasurālī*" ["In-laws"] also appears unfeminine from the traditional perspective. Traditionally, a married woman is subjected to her husband and she needs to obey and follow him. Lynn Bennett, an anthropologist, who has studied the social and symbolic role of Brahmin and Chhetri women in Nepal, posits that the wife should show respect and humility towards her husband. She explains: "She must walk behind him, carry burdens for him, eat after he has finished, refer to him in honorific terms . . . and generally try to serve him in every possible way possible" (174). Her informants, who were Brahmin and Chhetri women, concord, "it was their dharma to be obedient, respectful and pleasing to their husband" (175). Women in the mainstream culture of Nepali society, unless they have open contradictions with their husband, respect and obey them.

But Khoksung's wife does not submit to him, and she frequently runs away from her home. Khoksung, while going to fetch her from his in-laws, recalls that this is the fourth time he has gone to fetch her. He wonders why she keeps running away. She has not been the victim of domestic violence. The mother in law is quite generous.

Khoksung's flashbacks of the incidents of the first night, when she ran away from his home, hints that he fails to satisfy her sexual urges. The narrator narrates the incident:

bala garera thorai swāsnītira saryo. uslāi swāsnīko jībātā tāto rāpa āeraheko jasto lāgyo. usale ātagarera swāsnītira hāta badhāuna mātra ke khojeko thiyo, swāsnīle kokhāmai ghusi mārī. Khoksung hala na chala bhayo. [Gathering courage, he moved a bit closer to his wife. He felt the warmth of her body. No sooner he had dared to stretch his hand towards her, she kicked him so sharply that he became motionless.] (30)

Though they were unfamiliar to each other, Khoksung's wife must have expected Khoksung to take initiation for sexual intercourse with her as the husband. Khoksung behaved very timidly. So, she kicked him off the cot and ran away from his house. It defies the normativity of a newly married wife who would behave submissively.

Khoksung's wife subverts the traditional notion of a virtuous woman. The virtuous woman cares for her family's prestige and suppresses her desires. She will even endure violence to protect the family's honor. Thapa posits that "in Nepali society girls are taught to emulate femininity from their early childhood." She argues that girls are "reminded, over and over, to behave demurely, to be pleasing, to agree, to smile. The messages come from all directions, all the time. We're taught early in life that we're just girls" ("Women" para. 2). So, in mainstream Nepali society, the parents tend to discourage a married daughter from leaving her in-laws house without taking permission from them. Nepali literature, too, replicates this tradition. But Khoksung's wife's parents do not object to her. When Khoksung reaches his in-laws, his father in law, rather, tells him to convince her. He orders him: "*tero sāsniho, āphai phakāera lai jā* [She is your wife, you convince and take her]" (39). Khoksung warns her to go to his house. However, she ignores his warning. Her body language shows her disregard for his order. Her activities defy the notion of shyness, submission, subservience, obedience and endurance demanded from women.

Khoksung's wife remains hostile towards Khoksung until he confirms his masculinity in terms of sexual relation. Though not directly stated, the narrator hints that they have sex after Khoksung grabs her when she has come to pee outside at night and plays with her body. Khoksung's worries about her reaction after the incident suggests this. Contrary to his expectation, the next day she serves him with delicious *jāda* (homemade alcoholic product) and lovingly suggests that they need to start early to go to their home. Her portrayal supports third wave feminists who deny "essentialist narratives about dominant men and passive women and shape new identities within the interstices of competing narratives. There is no one way to be a woman" (Snyder 185). Khoksung's wife wants her husband to meet her sexual urge. In an intimate relationship she wants her husband to dominate her.

Khoksung's wife is fearless and strong. Unlike the problem of women pointed by the Second Wave feminist Betty Freidan, she has not been overburden by domestic works, nor is she the victim of domestic and sexual violence. Freidan argues:

Equality and human dignity are not possible for women if they are not able to earn. Only economic independence can free a woman to marry for love, not for status or financial support, or to leave a loveless, intolerable, humiliating marriage or to eat, dress, rest, and move if she plans to marry. (370-71)

Khoksung's wife's problem cannot be addressed by economic independence. Her activities remind hooks who suggests that theory should solve real life problems (5). The mainstream Nepali feminism which, as Seira Tamang points out, fails to address the issues of ethnic women (63). She has not experienced male dominance or other types of problems experienced by the middle class women as pointed by the Second Wave feminism. Similarly, unlike the ideal woman, who is said to be devoid of sexual desire, she has. It suggests that her problem is not male domination or domestic violence. She is autonomous and wants sexual pleasure from her husband; but she expects him to use force in relation. Her manner supports Snyder's assertion, "Women can advocate legal equality and still desire inequality in their intimate relationships" (190). This supports third wave feminist's belief that all women do not share common experiences.

"Thote Sāilo" ["Toothless Sailo"] is another story that deals with the problem of an unmarried Limbu youth. Thote Sailo as the name suggests has lost two of his front teeth and the girl's parents insult him and reject his marriage proposal for he looks older than his age. Govinda Limbu, known as Thote Sailo has tried to emulate the mainstream culture of the Nepali society in his manner, speech and in the adoption of the tradition of *cākari* (sycophany). Chakari is an attempt to be close to or in the presence of the person whose favored is desired" (Bista 5). It exposes the malpractices of favoritism practiced in Nepali bureaucracy. In Dor Bahadur Bista's term: "It is a passive form of instrumental behavior whose object is to demonstrate dependency, with the aim of eventually eliciting the favour of the person depended upon" (5). Thote Sailo studied hard; but he failed Bachelor Degree. He had been devotedly engaged in students' politics; but he could not be a member of the central committee. It also shows how the ethnic people are excluded from the power. Yet, he claims that he has been close to the political leaders. He is satisfied with his life's achievements, though he lacks a wife.

Though the story centers on Thote Sailo, Pabitra, the major female character of the story is significant to highlight Limbu people's disregard to unproductive people. She is an easy going, confident lady. When Thote Sailo proposed to her, after she had gone to him seeking his support for finding a job, she said she would marry him on the condition her parents accepted their marriage. Her arrival to his room brought him a ray of hope. She asked him to support her to find a job as he is closer to the power. Since Thote Sailo knows how to flatter people, he assured her that he would find her a job and asked her to remain in contact. A few days later, he called her and proposed to her. Her response shows Limbu women's independence. She explained that she would marry him on the condition her parents negotiated. She must have comprehended that Thote Sailo wanted to manipulate the situation. She, too, wanted to manipulate the situation. It shows that she is tactical. Her response suggests that not all Limbu women are straightforward.

Limbu people believe in productive work. The daughters are not taken as a burden in the family. So, her father blatantly refused Thote Sailo's proposal as he responded: *nāthe mantrī bhaera ke nāpincha? umeramā lāhura jānu chaina*. [Useless! What is the use of being a minister? One should join the foreign army in time"]. Pabitra's sister also commented that the suitor looked aged (70). Though his friend defended that he had been Pabitra's classmate, she reasoned that being in the same class does not mean that you are of the same age.

Pabitra is portrayed as an educated and expressive woman, but she is a sadist. Thote Sailo feels insulted and betrayed by her. He wonders why she has to send him to

her parents with the marriage proposal, if she does not like her. She could have rejected him straightly. Thote Sailo thinks that she has played with his sentiment. Contrary to Pabitra, her sister is straight forward. The way she insults Thote Sailo saying that he looks aged defy the notion of decency and courtesy expected from a girl. A girl is discouraged to interrogate people who are there with a marriage proposal. So, the parents hush them up. But neither Pabitra nor her sister cares about the protocol that one needs to maintain while receiving the suitor. In this regard they come closer to the third wavers. Snyder explains that "third wavers feel entitled to interact with men as equals, claim sexual pleasure as they desire it, (heterosexual or otherwise), and actively play with femininity (179). Their activities justify the girl power which is a central strand within the third wave.

Likewise, the portrayal of Paribhitti Bhauju in "Handaneke Bihe" ["Handane's Wedding"] also violates the notion of chastity, and purity attached to the ideal woman in the mainstream Nepali literature. Paribhitti Bhauju became a widow in her prime age. However, disregarding the social scandal, she develops intimacy with Landane, a youth from the village who has returned to the village during his work leave from the Golf country. He visits her frequently as she sells home made alcohol. Local youths are her customers. She shrewdly runs the business: She serves some of her customers affectionately whereas sternly chastises others. When one of her customers blames her biasness, as she serves Landane with a special *jāda*, she physically assaults him. The narrator reports:

'lu ta.' Paribhittī Bhaujūle deckī kucine gari Mangtokeko tāukoma bajāin. bhanina. 'mukha samalera bola. ma tero swāsnī ho ra manaparī bhanne?' ["Take it.' Paribhitti Bhauju hit Mangtoke on his head with the aluminum kettle so hard that it got twisted. She warned him to tame his wild tongue for she was not his wife so that he can rebuke her.] (87)

She is aggressive, quarrelsome and manipulative. She is physically strong enough to protect herself. Her attack on Mangtoke defies the traditional understanding of the widows who are vulnerable to sexual and domestic violence. Likewise, it also suggests that not all women are helpless. Though a widow she is ferocious and defensive.

Paribhitti Bhauju's portrayal also shows that Limbu women are economically independent. Their economic independence supports them to fight with adversity. She cunningly manipulates the situation to her favor. For instance, when the villagers gather at her house and interrogate about her pregnancy, she pretends as if she has been exploited, seduced by someone and cries shedding torrential tears. Then she notices Haldane, Landane's elder brother playing with her son. Haldane is mentally retarded. Despite his father's attempt to get him married, no girl accepts to marry him. Paribhitti Bhauju quickly reads that the situation is unfavorable to her. Since Handane frequently visits her house to play with her son and sometimes she feeds him with *jāda*, she knows that people will accept their relationship. Then she tells the villagers that she was impregnated by Haldane. Since Haldane is busy playing with her son, he nods his head affirmatively. Subba Harkaboli, his father, happily congratulates him because he has found a bride for his mentally retarded son: "*mero Handane, syabāsa* [My dear Handane, congratulation!]" (96). Her manipulation of the situation suggests that she is shrewd and cunning. Her portrayal defies the image of a chaste woman. Nonetheless, it shows that ethnic women are empowered and they have control over their body.

"Manamāyā" is the only female centered story of the collection. It tells the story of Manamaya, a girl from a poor Limbu family. Unlike the other female characters, she suffers from gender based discriminations like uneven division of household labor and domestic violence. Though she is just nine years old, she has to look after her toddler brother along with doing the other chores. She has to drop out of school after her mother delivered her youngest brother as mentioned in the book: "*Manamāyā mātra naubarsakī che. barsa dinko bhai hernu ra kukhura syālale lancha ki? bhanera gothālo garnu usako kāma ho.*" [Mana Maya is just nine years old. She has to babysit her one year old brother and protect the chickens from the wolf as her duties.] (136). Manamaya has to drop out of school to support her mother because she has to work in the field. In the poor family, most girls are forced to leave the school to provide helping hands to the parents.

Manamaya's suffering suggests that poverty affects daughters more than it affects sons. She has been made to leave the school, not only because her parents are poor but also because she is a daughter. Her younger brother, Mangale is still going to the school. He denies doing household chores. Studies on women in Nepal have found that "girls received less education because of their large share of household duties" (Upadhaya 434). Statistics also prove that 28% girls in the age 10-14 are involved in economic work, as compared to 18.1% of boys of the same group (442). It shows girls are likely to discontinue their schooling because they have to support their mothers both at home and in the field. Mangale spends his time playing after school, but Manamaya has to take responsibility like the older people. In addition, her mother beats her when one of the family's roosters has been eaten by the wolf. She scolds her for not being alert and taking care of the birds and animals though Manamaya has gone to Maili Temba asking her to breast feed her brother. Manamaya's suffering also suggests that poverty harms girls more than it harms boys.

Manamaya suffers more from poverty than from patriarchy. Her mother regrets beating and scolding her. She poignantly shares with her husband that they have committed crime by delivering kids as they fail to raise and educate them properly: "*chyā! chorachorī janmāera pāpai mātra gariyo. na ramro khānulāunu dinu sakincha na ta padhāuna lekhāunai*" [Disgusting! We did crime by delivering children. Neither we can feed and clothe them nor educate them] (143). It proves that patriarchy operates differently in different societies. Because of poverty, Manamaya stops going to school and engages in the household chores despite her desire for learning.

These female characters exhibit both masculine and feminine traits in their activities. They work in the field, control their productivity, take part in trade and respond to their sexual needs. They treat their men as their equal, and work independent of their husband. Yet, they have embraced femininity as well. They are well aware about the working of the psyche of the heterosexual men. They use their feminine image at their benefit as Paribhitti Bhauju charms the men and runs her business. They differ from the portrayal of Nepali women, which Tamang identifies as the homogenized "agency-less 'Nepali woman'" found in mainstream Nepali Literature. She claims that "Limbu women who are free to divorce and remarry as widows" (65). The activities of these ethnic women support Butler's argument that gender is "performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence." For her "gender is not a fact" (190), rather it is expressed in the repeated acting out of specific behaviors. These

women's activities defy the traditional notion of femininity and challenge the patriarchal belief that women are innately inferior to men. They have not embraced attributes like weak, dependent, submissive and subservient as feminine attributes.

Conclusion

The analysis of the five stories from *Dumb Hill* reveals that the text portrays different images of ethnic women. They are portrayed beyond the categories of good and bad ones. Active, assertive and energetic, they interact with their men as their equal. They are independent, fearless and quarrelsome as well. As wife and mothers, their gender roles are not limited to domesticity. They work together with their men in the field, take part in the economic transaction and have control upon their body. They want pleasure and respond to their sexual urges. Birkhe's wife as a mother and wife defies the image of self-pitying, helpless woman despite her dire situation. She gets angry, scolds and beats her children, and questions her husband. But at the same time she is considerate, practical and ground to the earth. Khoksung's wife is portrayed as a runaway wife. However, she is not depicted as a trouble maker. She wants to be assured that Khoksung will satisfy her sexual urges. Paribitthi Bhauju is portrayed as a young widow with a child. Though a widow, she, too, has sexual urges, and she manages to get a husband for her. Likewise, Pabitra is portrayed as a shrewd young lady who can handle the situation tactfully. Only Manamaya is portrayed as a helpless daughter who is the victim of gender based violence. But on top of that, she suffers from violence because of poverty.

The portrayal of these female characters, thus, subverts the images of women featured in the mainstream Nepali literature. None of them are the victim of gender based violence and experience male domination. They are independent and are equal to their male counterparts. They do not submit to the will of the men. They control their body and have pleasure. They are loving, kind and considerate; but at the same time, they are aggressive, short tempered and defensive. They have embraced both masculine and feminine traits. Their portrayal suggests that Limbu culture is not hierarchical in terms of gender, and treats men and women as equal.

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