

## Book Reviews

Archana Thapa, ed. 2068 v.s. *Swaastitwako Khoj*. Kathmandu: Akshar Creations Nepal.

Women are often thought of as voiceless beings: people for whom fathers, husbands, and sons do the talking. In fact women's lives have many aspects – personal, professional, intellectual – even if our society has yet to recognize the social platforms on which women's voices could be heard and accepted. Without legitimate outlets, women often remain silent, their voices lost, or at least repressed.

*Swaastitwako Khoj* [In Search of Self], a collection of women's narratives edited by Archana Thapa, provides these repressed voices a stage on which to be heard. Most of the writings in the book aim to find 'self' inside different household roles, personal experiences, and professional careers. The narratives also attempt to show the diversity within the category of 'women.' Thapa claims that the book is not "an attempt to foster feminism or outdo the male ideologies."<sup>1</sup> But, despite this claim, many of the writings highlight the woes and suffering of women in a patriarchal society.

Published by Akshar Creations – Thapa's own publication house – the book looks like a sequel to the book *Telling a Tale* (2010), Thapa's first attempt at publishing women's narratives. Like the first book, which was in English, this book touches upon many issues experienced by women as women. But as with *Telling a Tale*, here also the question arises: *which* women? Most of the articles in the volume are by women who have direct and indirect personal contacts with Thapa. This means that almost all the narratives here are by people who are already established in academic, writing, and professional fields or who are in the process of establishing themselves. Therefore, these narratives represent the collective experience of one class rather than reflecting a diversity of women's experiences across classes.

The book contains 36 narratives and two poems. Based on the contents of these narratives, we can put them in three different categories. The first category focuses on women's worldviews, their struggles, and sufferings.

<sup>1</sup> *Friday: Events and Entertainment Weekly*. Available at: [http://fridayweekly.com.np/uploaded\\_image/issue/pdf/Friday\\_110.pdf](http://fridayweekly.com.np/uploaded_image/issue/pdf/Friday_110.pdf); accessed 29 May 2014.

The narratives that I consider in the second category have nothing to do at all with women's perspectives; these narratives would have been the same even if they had been written by the other genders. Similarly, the narratives in the third category are completely off track. For instance, many of these writings do not at all relate to the theme and title of the book.

Discussing all these narratives is impossible in a short review. Therefore I have selected only a few of them as examples in each category. The first category of narratives raises women's issues; they talk about the multiple roles and responsibilities of women in Nepali society. These narratives not only talk about life events, but also connect these with the larger social imagination and beliefs. One of these writings (Gita Panth's narrative) shares the author's personal and socio-psychological experiences during pregnancy. Another essay (by Alka Atreya Chudal) describes the transformation from the merry experience of being pregnant into the sorrow and pain of giving birth to a girl child, thereby disappointing family members' expectations. This has been a common experience for many women in Nepal where sons are given importance and daughters are taken to be a burden on the family.

Some writers are bold and, through their narratives, question social beliefs. For example, Bhawani Chhetri, a divorcee, talks about her right to get married a second time. Her decision about the second marriage does not match with socially accepted ideas of marriage and remarriage. This not only disconnects her from society, but also from her family members who take her ideas to be silly, stupid, and selfish. Uneducated, educated, and even well-established people – men and women – do not agree much with what she thinks. The irony here is that some of these same men have themselves remarried after the death of their first wives.

Women's lives are not only complex in personal ways and inside family households, but they are equally challenging for women outside the house. In this regard, the book includes narratives by prominent people (including writers) who raise the issue of socially established norms. Most of the book's contributors write after having lived through all the assigned roles as women. It was from their years of struggle and determination that they were able to create their identity as writers. This makes us realize that there might be many 'dead and lost' writers in Nepal who could not fight back for their ambitions. Some here even sacrificed their personal lives for their careers. Among these is Manisha Gauchan, a popular writer whose first book, *Walliko Dāyari* (2063 v.s.), was quite famous among Nepali youth. By following her

desire to be a writer, she had to give up many other things including her family life. We can take her writing as an example of the situation of many women writers in Nepal.

*Swaastitwako Khoj* also includes details on women's experiences during their first menstruations: what they feel, how they feel, and how in a split second (before and after menstruation) the experience marks the break between their lives as youths and as adults. At the same time, menstruation also separates women from the other genders (see the narrative by Kalpana Bantawa). Sharada Sharma also talks about menstruation in her essay. Relating the menstruation cycle with identity, Sharma talks about her desperation after the surgical removal of her uterus. Her realization of the crisis of her identity after the operation will make us think what it is that really defines us as 'women.'

Seema Abhas's narrative circles around social expectations and concerns towards married women with regard to how and what they wear. She talks about how her family and friends perceived her when, after her marriage, she did not wear a bead necklace typically worn by married Hindu women. People kept on pressuring her to wear the necklace, even connecting it to promoting a long life for her husband. Her writing is a very good example of societal views that place women under the shadow of men. People don't care much about women's views but they are always worried and disturbed by women's lifestyles if they do not match common understanding of how women should lead their lives.

The poem by Usha Sherchan talks about women as being puppets in their personal, social, and familial lives. She claims that women's actions, reactions, and even ideologies are not their own. They are merely a given phenomenon, a representation of patriarchal ideology. Archana Thapa looks for her missing (teenage) years and compares them with the teen thoughts and desires of recent times as expressed by her two daughters. She talks about changes in women's lives across two generations.

The second category of narratives includes writings that, though very good in terms of language and structure, lag behind many others if we compare them with the overall theme of the book. Readers will feel that the link connecting these writings with the book's theme is missing. A few of these essays read more like general memoirs (see for example, the narratives by Uma Subedi, Harimaya Bhetwal, Manju Bimali): they talk about particular events which have nothing to do with gender or identity. The explanation of

events would have been similar even if the other genders had written about them. It makes the readers ask whether or not there should be any differences between a memoir written by a woman in search of 'self' and the more general memoir written for other purposes. Subedi, for example, writes about her painful childhood memory of skipping school and working the whole day on the banks of the Biring River to collect money to buy a radio. Similarly, Bhetwal writes about her memory of being kidnapped by an unknown group of people who let her go after listening to the story she tells them, which might also seem a little over-defined. Some of the other articles seem incomplete: after reading them, readers will be left in a dilemma.

Unlike other writings, for example those by Sherchan, Gauchan, or Sharma, some narratives mix many things together making them clumsy. For instance, Amrita Lamsal talks about many aspects and experiences of her life, which makes her writing a little messy. She talks about her mother and herself, and says how working outside the sphere of the household was considered bad for a woman. Along with this, she talks about stereotypical thinking that women should lead life both inside and outside the house. She also talks a bit about sexual harassment and the involvement of armed security personnel in it. The title of her essay, '*Āfī uttāuli bhayepachi yestai huncha...*' [it is because of your immodesty...], and her narrative do not clearly connect. Narratives of this category might leave readers in confusion.

The third category of narratives in *Swaastitwako Khoj* are essays full of self-praise for whatever achievements the authors have accomplished in their lives. The issues these narratives raise are important – as they attempt to talk about difficulties women face in the education sector or in their homes – but they are overshadowed by their own focus on 'me and myself.' Among few of such writings are narratives by Susmita Nepal and Sudha Tripathi. Despite touching on some aspects of women's lives, they get off track and end up focusing on their own successes and achievements. These narratives feel like communications between the authors and themselves, not the readers. Similarly, in the book's preface, the editor says that the main intention behind publishing this book was to help readers understand women's experiences in Nepali society and their views about social beliefs. In other words, the book intends to give an account of social, cultural, and gender inequalities through the experiences of women. Furthermore, editor Thapa says that the book is an effort to bring women's voices out in mass, thereby breaking the walls of silence created by society and family. But when we read the book we

find that many articles or narratives have taken the wrong direction (a few of which I have mentioned above), away from her claims and the book's theme.

However, overall the book is a useful read. It is helpful in that it gives multiple perspectives of women on different aspects of their lives. The book also provides a platform for women writers (both amateurs and established) to come together and share their experiences as women. The book is essential because there has been so little effort to publish collections of women's narratives. The hope is that Thapa's effort will inspire further publications of a similar nature, which are crucial in order to understand women's worldviews.

**Rashmi Sheila**  
South Asian University