

# Moral Choices and Global Desires: Feminine Identity in a Transnational Realm

ERNESTINE McHUGH

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**ABSTRACT** *Global changes during the last three decades have greatly altered the spatial and moral orientations of individuals in Nepal. This has caused a reordering of gender relations that has influenced the life experience of many women, challenging existing notions of feminine identity. Here, I apply a feminist psychological anthropology to understanding the ways in which social transformations in Nepal have shaped the hopes, ideals, and actions of a particular young woman who has been empowered, rather than burdened and displaced, by the changes of globalization. Her example shows how an analysis of individual lives can illuminate the motivating forces and differential effects of globalization and demonstrates that attention to gender is necessary for understanding the complex relationship between power and experience. [gender, identity, globalization, self, Nepal, women]*

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## AIMS AND ORIENTATIONS

Globalization seems, par excellence, an area in which matters of culture and psyche intersect and in which gender issues carry particular weight. Because the motives and desires of individuals both respond to and drive global change, and identity is an inextricable part of inner life, psychological anthropologists are well placed to address issues of globalization and identity. A feminist psychological anthropology can make a particularly powerful contribution to understanding

the ways in which global change shapes gender relations and the complex emotional processes that accompany these—issues that are critically important as people engage new social forms. The rhetorics of individualism, democracy, and human rights have softened the hold of patriarchy in many changing societies (or at least have altered the terms in which it is played out), requiring women and men to reconfigure their relationships, redefine their identities, and rework their self-concepts.

During the past three decades, the social worlds and physical spaces that shape models for moral life in Nepal have changed greatly in response to globalization. Conceptions of self and beliefs about life possibilities have changed even more dramatically. Global capitalism and the media productions that express its values challenge previously existing beliefs and expectations, offering radically different models of appropriate feminine behavior, the social place of women, and the meaning of sexuality. These cultural changes require young women in urban centers, who have developed to adulthood exposed to both local and global moral perspectives, to craft coherent and acceptable identities for themselves in a social milieu that is complex and demanding. Although the current situation may bring conflicts in values and generational tensions in its wake, contemporary social circumstances have relieved certain privileged Nepali women of some of the burdens of patriarchy and the conflicts these entailed.

For rural women, however, the economic pressures that have accompanied such social changes have created other problems. To survive in an impoverished, increasingly consumer-oriented society, large numbers of men have left Nepal to seek wage labor abroad, leaving women solely responsible for home, family, and agricultural work. In another response to change, Nepal's Maoist movement has been engaged in a conflict for eight years, siphoning men from the community through recruitment or killing. Although its ideology provides an alternative to competitive consumerism and traditional female subservience, attracting some women to join the Maoist struggle, the disruption, fear, and loss of life resulting from the "people's war" has caused much suffering.<sup>1</sup>

The trajectory I trace here stops short of the Maoist period in Nepal, and examines the trends that provide a context for it, especially the growing divide between those women like Sumitra, the subject of this article, who can use the possibilities of capitalism and urbanization to improve their lives, and others, who are mired in poverty and alienated from the spectacle of wealth that the media and urban consumer culture present.

This article focuses on the ways in which globalization has influenced the experience of gender and identity in Nepal, attending particularly to

one young woman—exceptional in her resourcefulness—and her family. Social change in South Asia has had a much more profound effect on the lives of women than on those of men, as Susan Seymour has made clear in her multigenerational study of women in India (Seymour 1999, 2001:10). This makes feminine experience particularly valuable as a vehicle for understanding the implications of globalization. By examining the moral perspectives and associated choices of a young woman who has lived through a time of radical change in Nepal, we can ground the much-discussed phenomenon of globalization in lived experience and come to understand it more richly.<sup>2</sup>

## MEETING SUMITRA

I first met Sumitra in 1978 when she was about four years old. Her hair was in little ponytails, and she wore a red pantsuit that her parents had brought back from Hong Kong when the family returned for a short time to Tebas, a Gurung village of about 500 people, located two days walking distance from the town of Pokhara. I saw her again in 1987, when her family returned to Nepal permanently after her father retired from the British army. They had built a house in Pokhara bazaar—then the second-largest city in Nepal—and Sumitra was a slim schoolgirl, studying at an English-medium school. I stayed with her family that summer, and returned to their home in Pokhara again in 1999 to find Sumitra grown and married. In 2001, I was the guest of Sumitra and her husband at Sandhurst Military Academy in England, where she and her baby daughter accompanied him on his tour of duty as a Gurkha soldier.

I focus on Sumitra and her family in this article because her life has spanned a time of tremendous change in Nepal. During my initial period of research, from 1973 to 1975, national *panchayat* politics, a limited representative system that preserved the power of the king, was just beginning to take hold in a real and transformative way in Tebas village, eroding the power of the *jimwal mukiya*, the village headman, who was Sumitra's grandfather and into whose household I had been adopted. Her mother's generation was the first to move to Pokhara from Tebas, building more Western-style houses and creating neighborhoods as they settled in new areas of the town. She was near 15 when the Nepal *jana andolan*, or People's Movement, agitating for representative multiparty democracy, radically altered the terms of government in the country and facilitated social change through democracy and free speech.

Sumitra's life, and her constructions of gender and identity, are best understood in context. Changing historical, political, and economic conditions in Nepal have profoundly affected her experience and the repertoire of ideas and images in terms of which she understands herself and her life possibilities. These changes have involved processes referred to as "globalization," in that the community that is her reference group goes far beyond the localized region in which her mother and grandmothers grew up. In fact, although she identifies herself in a variety of ways as Gurung, the Gurung village from which her family comes is somewhat peripheral to her as a site of actual interaction and as a basis for self-definition.

## THE LARGER CONTEXT

In examining globalization and its relation to gender in personal terms, it is important to remember that there is no undifferentiated process of globalization. From my point of view here, the trends that have been termed "globalization" involve increasing integration in a capitalist world economy, fragmentation of geographically bounded communities, and probably most importantly, a shift in perspective that places the locus of value and the authority to evaluate it, in a domain of the imagination powerfully shaped by the West (Elteren 1996; Hallowell 1954; Liechty 2003; Piġg 1992).

In a discussion of social worth, Unni Wikan makes the point that value is not determined in reference to a set of abstractions. She points out that social worth (which among Gurungs strongly influences self-esteem and well-being) is determined for an individual by a variety of reference groups, some of which will likely be more significant than others (Wikan 1984:639–645).<sup>3</sup> Wikan refers to these as one's "relevant public." For Sumitra the "relevant public" that carries the most general authority exists in the urban centers of Nepal and in an associated realm of transnational symbols. Although these may have the most far-reaching impact, being most strongly associated with power and wealth, they are not the only ones to which she looks for validation and with which she identifies.

As noted above, my guiding question in this article is about what the trends that constitute globalization mean in reference to individual lives, to conceptions of gender, and to gender systems. Sumitra's lived experience has been shaped in a variety of ways, and she has taken an active role in defining her place in the world. In reflecting on Sumitra's life and the self she experiences and expresses in her surround, I would like to look closely at the particular ways in which history and politics

impinge on her, through examining the figures who have populated her life and shaped her imagination.

## **MAPPING A FAMILY**

I have known Sumitra's family for 31 years. I was adopted by her maternal grandmother as a "dharma-daughter" when I first came to Tebas village in 1973. I got to know her paternal grandmother, who lived on an adjoining terrace, gradually over time. Sumitra's maternal grandfather was the headman of Tebas village and he and his wife lived in a grand house with a large courtyard. Her paternal grandmother, a widow in a more modest lineage, lived nearby.

It is significant that each of their houses consisted of one main room on the ground floor that served the purpose of cooking, eating, visiting, and sleeping. Grain was stored on the floor above that room. In each house there was also a small room, reached from outside, that was used to store fodder or firewood. Newly married couples sometimes occupied such rooms, but usually all the family members slept in the main room of a house. In the daytime people moved through one another's courtyards freely on the way to their fields, on errands, or to visit friends. Although there were brass pots on the kitchen ledges and an incense brazier, water pot, and lamp on the altar, there were no decorations on the walls of either house. The only items I remember seeing in village houses were practical: mats, dishes and cooking implements, and metal boxes in which people kept their clothes. Rarely, there might be a photo or a religious figure. During the first two years I lived in Tebas village (1973–75), several people made the comment that although I came from a rich country and undoubtedly had a lot of money, it made no difference there because there was nothing to buy in the village. Beyond matches and batteries, this seemed to be basically true. "Dhani, garib, kehi pharak chaina" [Rich or poor, it makes no difference], they would say.

Globalization is not a new phenomenon (Elteren 1996), although its present scale may be unprecedented, and it should not be imagined that Tebas village existed at any time in the 20th century at a great remove from the rest of the world. Sumitra's great-grandfather had served in World War I, and was said to have been one of the first people in the village with cash, which enhanced his hereditary position as headman. About the time that cash entered the village, so did tea, one of the first outside consumer goods to become integrated in village life. Two of this great-grandfather's sons were killed in World War II, and Sumitra's grandfather also fought in that war. Nearly 90 percent of the men in the village had served as Gurkhas, and

many spoke movingly of the campaigns in Europe and the suffering they witnessed among the civilians there. Their associations were not then to the West as a site of “progress” or “development” but of human pain, for which they had helped achieve a solution through their courage and skill. Retired soldiers sometimes talked of the surprising physical weakness of the European soldiers, who collapsed going up hills that they themselves could climb with ease. Men in the generations of the two World Wars did not speak of life in Europe as though it represented an ideal to which they aspired, and they returned to the village to live after their army service abroad.<sup>4</sup>

## **WOMEN IN THE VILLAGE**

During the period in which I initially conducted research in Tebas village, 1973–75, feminine identity was framed in terms of land and kinship (so that one was known as a member of a particular village and as kin of a specific lineage and clan), and women’s power was increased through traversing villages, developing kin ties in both the marital and natal homes and linking clans through intermarriage.<sup>5</sup> The generation of Sumitra’s grandparents was one in which girls married early, many between the ages of 10 to 12. There was no formal schooling in the village. The prestige of the lineage into which a girl was born, and its wealth (these two tended to go together), gave her value, as did her beauty and her character, measured in terms of her adherence to rules of modesty. Cross-cousin marriage was looked on favorably and a girl’s mother’s brother’s son or father’s sister’s son had the first claim on her for marriage. This meant that women had a network of relations that continued across generations, because the same lineages tended to intermarry. For example, ties between Sumitra’s family in Tebas and people in her grandmother’s lineage in the large village of Torr were very strong, as there had been intermarriage between them for at least three generations. Women played a crucial role in arranging later marriages, thereby developing and strengthening these ties, and gifts were exchanged each time a woman went back to her place of birth to visit her family, so that goods and kinship were tightly linked.

At this time, women’s social and economic well-being depended solely on marriage, and a young woman’s potential as a bride was evaluated by neighbors and kin within a clearly defined locality. Thus, we can see that local reputation and geographically bounded ties were very important to a woman’s future. Women also felt a personal connection to the land, and those who traveled to visit family members or attend ritual celebrations at other villages noted that they felt safer when they crossed rivers or reached

the slopes that marked their home territory. For Sumitra's grandmothers and for many of the women of her mother's generation, territory was not arbitrary and abstract but had emotional power and defined identity in important ways. Thresholds, gateways, and entrances to villages were marked with strings of flowers to keep evil influences out and protect those within the boundaries they marked. A valued woman was meant to move within circumscribed worlds and to remain reserved.

## **THE DISJUNCTIONS OF PATRIARCHY**

It is useful at this point to look more closely at gender relations and their symbolic expressions in South Asia, in general, and Nepal, in particular.<sup>6</sup> In Nepal, patriarchy defines access to resources more strictly than in the West, so that even under seldom-enforced laws women inherit property only if they remain unmarried, and in practice usually not even then. The women with whom I lived remained dependent on fathers, husbands, or brothers, and were usually fed less nutritiously, educated less well, and given less-costly care when they fell ill than were boys as they were growing up. Although among many groups in Nepal daughters are valued, it is stressed that they are raised to be given away in marriage. At marriage the girl was brought to the house of the groom, which (because of preferred village exogamy) tended to be some distance from her natal home, thus causing women to lose the companionship and support of family and friends. This disjunction in the lives of young women occurs in many parts of South Asia and laments about these losses and the hardships of married life are captured in poignant songs with lines like: "Father sought and brought a groom from a distant land; My tender heart is breaking" (Narayan 1986:64). To a large degree, disjunction is conceived as an inevitable part of female experience in Nepal (March 1998, 2002; Skinner and Holland 1998). As a feminist psychological anthropologist, I am most interested in the experience of this disjunction and its implications for a sense of self. Gender relations are rooted and reproduced in reference to the primal experiences through which the self is forged.

### **Articulations of Patriarchy: The Village**

The village I describe here is the one in which Sumitra's mother, father, aunts, uncles, and grandparents grew up. She returned there with her parents regularly, for months at a time, during her childhood and chose to make trips there as an adult, even after her parents had long ceased to visit. The Gurungs with whom I lived resided on the slopes of the foothills of the Annapurna Himalayas and engaged at that time in subsistence agriculture, some herding, and service in the Gurkha regiments of the British

and Indian armies.<sup>7</sup> At the time of my earlier research in the village (1973–75, 1978, 1980–82, and 1987) and Sumitra’s early childhood, few families had moved to urban areas. Gurung society was governed by patriarchal values, although women had considerable respect and power. Descent and inheritance were (and remain) patrilineal and, historically, political office was held by men. Women showed outward signs of deference to men, like walking behind them and obeying them in public. Women were said by members of both sexes to be morally and intellectually inferior to men, and were considered more likely to show greed, selfishness, and limited understanding. Patriarchal values were balanced somewhat by a general ethos of egalitarianism, so that the deference women showed to men was not extreme, age superseded gender as a basis for social superiority, and women were free to state an opinion in village council meetings. Cases at council meetings were settled by consensus, and an articulate and authoritative statement of opinion could strongly influence a final decision.

Even so, women suffered clearly recognized disadvantages in Gurung society. Men and women each made statements to the effect that the life of a woman was harder than that of a man. Both cited the exhausting nature of domestic work, and women particularly lamented the pain and danger of childbirth and the social rules that required that a woman be forced away from home when she married. The acute stress of dislocation at marriage was expressed in many ways, but the most powerful was in the idiom of imaginary beings, especially that of the *ban manche*, or forest men, creatures that had cultural and experiential reality for Gurungs (McHugh 2002b).

### **Gendered Idioms of the Forest Man: Power and Rage**

Ban manche were commonly encountered and frequently discussed among villagers. Adolescent girls and young married women often reported that they were reluctant to walk alone in the forest for fear of meeting a ban manche. They told of fleeting glimpses of the creatures on wood-cutting trips. Older women, usually those who lived alone, also reported sightings and unsettling encounters with ban manche. Men also acknowledged the existence of the ban manche, but their descriptions of the dangers and potentialities of meetings with the creatures differed significantly from those of women.

It was generally agreed that the ban manche were drawn to the village in search of women with whom they could satisfy their sexual needs. The consequence of being raped by a ban manche was to go mad or to wither and waste, finally shrinking to the size of a thumb. It was also believed that if a ban manche’s shadow fell across a human’s body, that person would

become ill, and some maintained the converse was also true so that a human shadow would cause a hapless ban manche to fall ill. Ban manche were believed to be able to possess humans, but few illnesses were attributed to ban manche possession. Rather, witches and the spirits of those who had died violent deaths were blamed for the bulk of supernaturally caused illnesses.

Men reported that the ban manche sought a variety of creature comforts in coming to the village, although their ultimate desire was access to women. Some male informants described a kind of Faustian scenario in which the ban manche came and offered wealth and power in return for the simple comforts of food and shelter. The host prospered in caring for the visitor, but soon the visitor moved in and assumed control of the household and property and the man began to waste and shrink, now caught in the grip of the ban manche's power. Ban manche were described by men in ambivalent terms that included the possibility of empowerment as well as danger. Nevertheless, although men occasionally told stories about the ban manche, they mentioned these beings less often than women did and spoke of them with less intensity of feeling.

The question then arises: What was it about female experience and selfhood that made the ban manche more salient at that time for Gurung women? To answer this question, I think it is helpful to consider some characteristics of feminine experience at that time among the Gurungs.

## **STRUCTURE, VALUE, AND EXPERIENCE**

As noted above, Gurungs are a people with a patrilineal system of descent. In the village, marriage was virilocal and village exogamy was preferred. These facts had powerful implications for female experience. What they meant was that to achieve full adulthood, which came through marriage and childbearing, a young woman had to be dispossessed. Among Gurungs, men were able to come to adulthood without breaking their ties to kin and leaving the locality (although needs for wage labor created other disjunctions for them). Women were forced to leave their homes in arranged marriages, about which they were not consulted or even informed until the day of the event, when the groom's party came and carried them away.

A woman was forced to leave her home and go to live in the household of strangers in which the largest share of house- and farmwork would fall to her. Even older women, long since settled into contented marriages, would talk of being married as a painful and poignant experience and recall with sadness the loneliness and hardship of early married life. Sumitra's great aunt, who had married into a village about half a day's walk from her

father's home, recalled that as a nine-year-old bride she would hide to cry at midday, missing the snack that was customarily served in her own village, but not in her new marital home, at that hour. Sumitra's mother's cousin-sister told me that she had been distraught when at the age of 11, she had been told by her younger sister of an overheard conversation in which her parents promised to give her to the family of her present husband. Young women frequently discussed their anxiety at knowing that any day they could be taken from their homes by a party of strangers. In Gurung society, the daughter was conceived and conceived of herself as one who would be given away.

As girls grew to adolescence and saw their neighbors and sisters given in marriage, their sense of belonging to home and family became more tentative. They felt, at the same time, the pressure of sexual needs. Adolescent girls whom I knew well would speak of feelings of conflict, saying that they were torn between love and loyalty to their parents and their own desires to flirt and keep company with the boys they liked. They reported that the path that protected family honor would lead to an arranged marriage and departure to an unknown place, whereas flirtation, elopement, and disgrace would give them some control over their own destinies, although at the cost of estrangement from their parents. They experienced inner conflict and, during this stressful period, they felt a fragmentation of self, described by older women who observed and perhaps empathized with these young women as the experience of having "different hearts"—one that showed on the outside and another that remained hidden and was full of secret thoughts and sexual desires.<sup>8</sup>

Adolescent girls were acutely aware that their place in the family was temporary. The axes of home and kinship in terms of which they had located themselves became uncertain. In a world that emphasized belonging, they were sundered from the home by the dualisms of clan, which drove the marriage system, and of gender, which they enacted through their dislocation.<sup>9</sup> Adolescent girls and new brides occupied tenuous positions in Gurung society. They were not securely integrated in a society in which it was asserted that one should *milnu*, "fit in" or "get along," and *jamnu*, "coagulate," with others. For young women, whose impending marriages provoked feelings of resentment and anxiety, the imaginary beings may have provided a foil, in contrast to whom the young women could see themselves as belonging to the village. Although a young woman might have felt alienated, she knew that relative to a *ban manche* she was certainly a member of her human community. She also knew that were she to reject the demands of the community and try to run away from an impending marriage, the jungle outside the village was filled with threatening beings. On one level, ideas about these beings could be seen as a cultural strategy that shored up a fragile sense of belonging, symbolically

contained young women's rage, and provided a specter of danger that motivated them to conform to social demands. As figures, the ban manche defined a social and emotional boundary.

## MARRIAGES AND MILESTONES

The boundary enforced by the forest men remained intact through the generation of Sumitra's mother, Maili, although as she was coming of age it had begun to erode. Maili was brought up in Tebas village, the second daughter of the headman. Hers was the interstitial generation, raised in the village but involved in education in government institutions intended to generate loyalty to the Hindu nation-state, and to teach ideals of *bikas* or "progress," and attendant attitudes and behavior. Women of her cohort were familiar with Hindi cinema from visits to the town, and accompanied their Gurkha husbands abroad. However, during that time, education and development were both controversial. Development officers who visited the village were referred to as ignorant and arrogant, although with time, items like water taps were coveted and their presence brought prestige to the village. When I lived there in the 1970s, education was admired in principle, but I still heard remarks from older people like "What do they learn in school? Educated girls run off and marry Magars, and educated boys beat their parents. There is nothing to be gained in educating children." Sumitra's mother, in a sense, demonstrated this point as she herself eloped with a neighbor whom she loved and respected against the wishes of her family, returning with him to Hong Kong when his leave from the Gurkha regiment was finished. She moved from the open room of her home in the village to an army apartment in the Gurkha garrison in Hong Kong. Sumitra and her two brothers were all born in the Gurkha hospital there.

During Sumitra's childhood, she and her family returned to the village periodically when her father was on leave. Her mother's family eventually forgave the elopement, although both the parents and some of the brothers and sisters talked of how it had harmed their family honor, and a younger sister was quickly married off when it seemed that she was developing a flirtation with a young Gurkha soldier from the village. As a consequence, Maili negotiated her position with care. She was extremely responsible in carrying out family and other social obligations. She had been widely admired in the village as a young woman, and was able in time to achieve a position of considerable respect in the community. People in the village said that even as a girl she had been very clever and decent, noting her skill in crafts like weaving as well as her initiative and imagination in learning things like sewing with a machine. They

said she was kind and never arrogant, and that she alone of her age cohort would sometimes wear the older style of Gurung dress (most often seen on elderly village women), saying that she found it comfortable and cozy.

Maili's imagination and intelligence served her well and also helped many family members. When Sumitra was about 12 years old, her father retired from the British army and the family built a house in Pokhara. When I visited in 1987, it was a one-story house on a street some distance from the main part of town, with a few houses on it and many open, grassy spaces. The house was made of cement painted pastel colors; inside was a large living room, a room where the family slept, a guest room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. Education and consumer goods had by then become important markers of prestige: Maili's children were each attending prestigious English-medium schools and Maili noted that her son, who was then seven years old, liked to play only with foreign-made toys. Maili and her husband also brought her youngest sister, Kanchi, down from the village to attend a well-respected girls' school in the town. It had become difficult by the mid-1980s for an uneducated girl to make a good marriage. As among the urban families in India studied by Susan Seymour, educated boys, who had better financial prospects, preferred girls with sufficient education to move in sophisticated circles, and to work for a salary, if necessary (Seymour 1999:102–104). In the town, Kanchi told stories from time to time of chilling near encounters with the forest men, but from her new vantage point at Maili's house in Pokhara, they were remote.

As had her elder sister, Kanchi fell in love with a Gurkha soldier of her acquaintance, but because the criteria for honor and for a proper match had changed, it was not necessary for her to elope. Earlier in the 1970s, in Maili's time, boys could voice a preference from a range of girls selected by their parents, but girls were neither asked about nor informed of the arrangements for their marriages. It was believed shameful for a girl to confess (especially to her parents) to liking any boy and parents thought it better not to inform a girl of an impending marriage, lest she run away. By the early 1990s and in the town, Kanchi was able to admit her affection for her future husband, and they were married in an elaborate ceremony in the presence of many relatives, with the approval of her father. After decades of romantic Hindi movies, and given many shifts in the constitution of social ties, affectionate feeling for a man was no longer in itself a cause for shame. Although Maili had initially claimed to me that her marriage had been arranged (although her mother and sister told me otherwise), Kanchi admitted openly to me that hers had been a love marriage that was formalized by her family.

## REDEFINITIONS OF PLACE AND SELF

Sumitra's life and her constructions of gender and identity have been influenced by very different circumstances than those that constrained her mother's and grandmother's lives in the village of Tebas. Sumitra's lived experience has been shaped in a variety of contexts, and she actively participates in defining her identity, negotiating among various cultural models of a proper life that are now available to her (Strauss and Quinn 1997).

Transnational models of self and of success, available in urban centers through satellite television, magazines, and movies, are strongly validated by the wealth and power of the societies from which they derive, but they bear a loose relation to the moral orientations Sumitra internalized as she was growing up. The child-rearing practices that she experienced were mixed, given that she grew up in a remote Gurung village, on British army bases in Hong Kong, and in an urban center in Nepal.

Her mother and father subscribed to the models of social interaction prevalent in the village and taught their children values such as hospitality and generosity, stressing the importance of a socially embedded self (McHugh 1989, 2001a; Parish 1994). They lived for many years, however, in Western-style houses with individual rooms for the children—a huge change from village households in which families shared one room for all activities—although Gurung family members and friends often shared these spaces. They also educated Sumitra to college level and deliberately exposed her to a wide range of experience that provided her with alternative models of self and of value (by hosting British volunteers, e.g., so that the children would learn English). As a reflection of this, Sumitra lives between worlds linguistically, understanding both Gurung (spoken by her parents) and English (studied at school) but fluent in only Nepali, the national lingua franca.

## ROOMS AND SHIFTING REFERENCES

By 1999 in Pokhara, identity and locality were not mapped onto one another as they had been in the village as well as in the older parts of town, where lineage relations were expressed in rows of houses and people described themselves in terms of relationship. Self was now only loosely defined by place. Caste and ethnicity mattered to some degree, but lifestyle had also come to matter a great deal in defining one's identity.<sup>10</sup> Households were more self-contained, so relatives and close friends might drop in, but acquaintances would not come without an invitation. Neighborhood seemed more a patchwork of houses than a moral whole whose

dimensions had meaning, as had those of the village, whose boundaries were marked by *chorten* or strings of flowers that promised safety to those within them. This was the neighborhood in which Sumitra spent her adolescence, after a childhood in Hong Kong punctuated by visits to the village.

When I arrived in Pokhara in 1999 after a gap of 12 years, Maili's formerly rustic neighborhood was nearly unrecognizable. There was a bustling market on the corner, with vegetable stands and several shops. All but one or two spaces of open land were filled with houses. Her formerly single-story house was now two stories high, and on the roof was a large satellite dish. She and her husband had rented out the lower floor, and the upper floor consisted of a kitchen, living room with a sofa and chairs, glass cabinets, telephone, and a large television. There were also three bedrooms: one shared by Maili and her husband, another occupied by their son, and the third belonging to Sumitra.

Unlike houses in Tebas village, which were communal and unmarked except for an altar with deities above it, the houses in Pokhara were divided into distinct personal spaces. In Tebas, boys had occasionally commandeered a storage space and made it into a personal room, rather plain and certainly temporary. Girls were never given rooms of their own but, rather, slept in the communal space, bedding down with their sisters, nieces, or mothers. In the town of Pokhara, both boys and girls not only possessed rooms, they marked them with decorations, proclaiming an identity through the display of goods.

Sumitra's room in her family's home was compact but pleasant. Although at the time of my visit she had been married to a soft-spoken young Gurkha soldier for two years, the room she had grown up in was still referred to as "Sumitra's room," and she stayed there on prolonged visits home when he was on duty. There were two beds in the room, a metal wardrobe, and a dressing table. There was a shelf with books and magazines, mainly copies of *Wave*, a youth magazine, and Indian women's magazines, like *Femina*. Above her window was a large poster from her husband with a verse in English, as follows:

To my wife:

Just can't say how much I love you,

Only that I love you more than anybody, anywhere,

Has ever loved before.

On her dresser was a wedding picture, a photo of Sumitra with some college friends, and a picture of her sitting on a *chautara*, or stone resting place, on the trail to the village, wearing a skirt and blouse with hiking boots. Next to the dressing table, taped to the side of her wardrobe, were photos of Western celebrity couples: Sylvester Stallone with his wife, Tom Cruise

and Nicole Kidman, Richard Gere and Cindy Crawford, along with a large picture of a lovely Indian actress. In 1999, Sumitra herself was in London, where she had gone to join her husband, after making a trip on her own to Hong Kong to arrange the papers that would allow her permission to work in Britain.

## ARTICULATING WOMANHOOD

What were Sumitra's ideas of feminine identity? The décor of her room provides hints as to what she values, but her words clarify this. When asked what her generation wanted, she emphasized the importance of freedom and exercise of will:

Kids go here and there, like to Hong Kong, and they make their own decisions. When they get big, they have their own opinions. They go places by themselves. They want to be happy. They don't want to act according to someone else's orders. If parents make a child marry someone, they may not be happy with them. They may not get along. People can be happy if they are able to live according to their own ideas. People of my generation want that.

In contrast to young Gurung women who lived in the village of Tebas in the 1970s and 1980s and the urban Newar women described by Parish (1994:141–144), all of whom spoke of the value of feminine submissiveness, Sumitra does not see assertiveness as inappropriate for a girl. Her marriage was arranged, but her parents allowed her to correspond with the suitors they selected, to see their photos, and to choose the one that she wished to marry. Boys were regarded by her parents as suitable more in relation to socioeconomic status than kinship status, although restrictions on ethnicity and clan remained strongly in place. As had her mother, but without the social disapproval she endured, Sumitra married a man she cared for and respected, with whom she shared romantic feelings. These were expressed in the affectionate poster on the wall of her room, one whose sentiments the men and women of her mother's generation would have judged immodest. Her display of the poster was tactful, because those who might find it inappropriate were unlikely to be able to read English, and those who could understand it were likely to have been indoctrinated into the ideology of romance that it celebrated. The celebrity photos with happy film star couples holding hands and gazing at the camera embodied that ideology—one that celebrated individual freedom, privacy, and pleasure. Interestingly, the photo of the beautiful woman alone, looking smilingly into the camera, was of an Indian movie star, someone who resembles Sumitra herself. Sumitra saw film and other media as demonstrating life possibilities, especially foreign ones, that viewers might wish to emulate, as she commented: “People learn many things from film. They

see other countries and other ways of doing things. Even from ads they can learn many things. I think it is very good.” Although she participated in romantic fantasies, as exemplified in her photos and her women’s magazines, Sumitra was aware of the pragmatic constraints on women. The restrictions imposed in the village that expressed moral worth and protected a girl from social criticism and male aggression also exist in the town, so that young unmarried women did not go about alone or strike up conversations with unrelated men without incurring criticism and perhaps danger (cf., Mukhopadhyay this issue). Although she accepted these limitations, at least when in Nepal, she chafed at them: “What you hear in Nepal is ‘Girls must not do this,’ and ‘Girls must not do that.’”

## SYNTHESIZING AN IDENTITY

Despite Sumitra’s impatience with them, gender restrictions had not greatly limited her mobility. Nor did she find her accommodation to cosmopolitan, urban life at odds with her rural background. One of Sumitra’s more prominently displayed photos showed her sitting on a chautara on the way to the village, dressed in Western clothes and hiking boots. I have another photo of her standing in her modern living room dressed in the old-style Gurung clothes that were worn in the time of her grandparents and are now, as ethnicity has become politicized, considered an icon of Gurung identity. Sumitra’s allegiance to modernity, demonstrated through her desires for freedom and choice and in her styles of self-expression, encompasses a sense of herself as related to the village, and to a marked Gurung ethnicity. Her involvement with transnational culture has not caused the kinds of conflict reported by Liechty (1995) among middle-class youth in Kathmandu, for whom the West is a fantasy discontinuous with their lives or a domain that they enter without family, by going abroad or wandering in the tourist areas of the city.

Sumitra’s experience of foreign countries has not alienated her from her Gurung community. Although she traverses a variety of worlds, her cosmopolitan sophistication was gained in the company of her family, and interwoven with trips to the village. Most of her mother’s sisters and brothers and their children have shared the experience of living abroad. Those family members who have not are marginalized, both in terms of experience and lifestyle, because money from Gurkha service opens possibilities for acquiring the consumer goods (computers, televisions, furniture, and motorcycles) that now signify honor and status as well as for such lifestyle accoutrements as education, further travel, and residence in fine houses. As formal associations, such as investment clubs, replace village ties, it is the wealthy who can afford to belong and to inhabit positions of influence.

Sumitra, with her education and family wealth, can move in and out of the village at will, an enviable position for many Nepalis.

Sumitra's definitions of femininity involved many models and implicated many reference groups: She realized her identity as a woman in reference to her husband and the realm of romantic love, in reference to the West and its media products, in relation to the conditions of her nation, and to the villages in which she spent time as a child. She also spoke of a transcendent role that linked her to all women—motherhood. At the time of this interview (2000), she had recently given birth to her first child. In response to a question I asked about what she would need to have a happy life, she replied:

- Sumitra:** I have a happy life. I got to have an education. I got to go to foreign lands. I got to give birth to a child, to have that experience. Just having one child, I got to know that womanly experience. You hear about it in words, but you don't really know it until you have had the experience. I got to have that woman's experience. Now I play a "mom's" role. I'll raise my daughter in a different way from how my mother raised me.
- Ernestine McHugh:** How so? What will you do differently?
- S:** What will I do? Everything is different now from when I was growing up. That is why she will be raised differently. . . . It is not like when my mother was raising me. The world changes, and that changes the way you raise a child.

Her sense of womanly self encompasses a shifting universe, de-centered, not localized, and she finds herself poised to respond to these conditions. Sumitra stands at the nexus of intersecting worlds, yet crafts a moral vision of life and her place in it that provides her with a sense of coherence and vitality. Sumitra and her husband speak eloquently of the importance of mutual obligation among "one's own people," a primary Gurung value forged in the village, and they participate in a strong network of support among friends—Gurung and non-Gurung—on the grounds of Sandhurst. Sumitra described the satisfaction she felt attending rallies in Pokhara that expressed Gurung pride (her mother was an officer of the large and important Pokhara Gurung Society) and the pleasure she took in returning to the village to visit with relatives there. She had incorporated a cooperative and affiliative model in her day-to-day life, sharing child-care arrangements with neighbors, making trips to the hospital to bring food and cheer to sick friends, coordinating packages when she or others returned to Nepal, and arranging vacations, housing, and work through a network of friends (and often in their company). These kinds of cooperation, rather than being in conflict with the aspirations for a modern, upwardly mobile life, furthered them. Sumitra was able to draw on a range of skills and ways of being to create an integrated and successful life in a

competitive society. She had internalized its goals, but not the prescribed individualistic means of meeting them.

Sumitra's family remains an important part of the relevant public in terms of which she enacts her identity, which provides her with continuity. She has been spared the conflict of those Nepali youth whose parents are unfamiliar with and antagonistic toward the cosmopolitan worlds they wish to inhabit (Liechty 2003:209–231). Unlike those who see the West as the site of success but cannot achieve a “modern” Westernized lifestyle, and can only imagine visiting the West, Sumitra is privileged, in that her financial means and life circumstances have put many of her cosmopolitan aspirations within reach. The status and prestige she accrues through her success in terms of Western values are both understood and appreciated in her community and have precedent in the experience of her well-traveled parents.

### **FREEDOM AND POSSIBILITY: BANISHING THE BAN MANCHE**

The spatial shifts Sumitra experiences are encompassed in her model of the world as desirable: broadening and enriching, rather than disorienting and threatening. They are felt as an expansion of her world, not as dislocation. Unlike her grandmothers in the village, Sumitra was able to negotiate the terms on which she married and moved away from home, and she has engaged foreign travel in an ordered way, combining the exotic experience of living in England with the familiar one of residing on a military base. Her values are marked by an appreciation of independence and choice, and her circumstances, including an egalitarian marriage to an unusually supportive husband who cooks, participates in child care, and encourages her to work, have allowed her to integrate these values in her daily life. The ideology of modernity works for Sumitra, and it is not surprising that she sees as its symbolic representation the inviting and attractive movie stars that adorn her room.

Familiar with the ban manche, or forest men, from her time in the village and the stories of her relatives, but distant from the pressures that gave them immediacy for her mother and aunts, Sumitra replied when I asked her about the ban manche, “Gone,” waving her hand dismissively at the trees under which we walked. The fact that the forest men are “gone” for Sumitra is deeply significant. As Bourguignon has shown in her discussion of possession and patriarchy (this issue), the distinctive pressures placed on women by patriarchy create inner tensions and conflicts that are externalized in symbolic forms.<sup>11</sup> Examining Sumitra's life, we can see the tight interrelation of social organization, psychological processes, and cultural meaning. The ban manche had a powerful experiential reality in

the lives of her mother and grandmothers. Sumitra has been freed from the constraints that fueled their existence, and they have faded into the periphery of her consciousness and lack, for her, vital force. They do not define her boundaries, and are not needed to express her rage.

## **GLOBALIZATION, CONFLICT AND SELF-DEFINITION**

Global changes create conditions that erode existing gender relations and require men and women to reconfigure their relationships and reconstitute their identities. In many cases, this deprives them of cultural resources and shatters a sense of continuity and belonging, so that the symbols through which they processed their emotions are rationalized and robbed of their power, although alternative *bikaasi* or modern ways of being—in which exercise of rational choice in service of goals brings success—are far removed from their reach. This kind of alienation and frustration is the lot of many poorer people in contemporary Nepal, making a religion-like ideology such as Maoism, which promises both community and progress, attractive to many.

Modernity, liberating for Sumitra, presents a conflicting and confusing set of imperatives even for many middle-class women in Nepal. Media images, consumer capitalism, and demands for women to participate in the public sphere are problematic for Nepali women in that they coexist in much of Nepal with the demand that women remain subservient to men and submissive in demeanor. The demand to display modern sophistication through fashion often conflicts with local ideas of appropriately modest feminine attire, public consumption necessary to maintain middle-class status erodes the capital necessary to sustain oneself economically (cf. Liechty 2003), and presence in the public sphere without companionship makes a woman vulnerable to male harassment. In addition, the limited freedoms that more “modernized” young women enjoy are often abruptly terminated at marriage (cf. Liechty 1996). Conflicting meaning systems and expectations leave many without a clear basis for self-definition.

This was not true for Sumitra, in part because of the nature of her family and her community. Her parents’ own marriage was founded on individual choice, and they invested willingly in Sumitra’s education, providing a model for independence and support for female autonomy. The quality of her marriage (like that of her parents, founded on mutual respect and affection), and the comparatively high regard with which women are held in Gurung society (in which they were never confined to the home or barred from participating in public discourse) all contributed to the combination of integration and autonomy that characterizes her life.

It is ironic that the primary vehicle that has loosened the constraints of patriarchy for Sumitra—that allowed her varied experiences within the security of her family, underwrote her education, and provided the prosperity that enabled her to make real choices—is one of the ultimate bearers of masculine values, the British army, within which both her father and husband have served as Gurkhas. This becomes, then, an account of how a young woman from a patriarchal social order was able to craft a life in keeping with her desire for independence and choice, a process in some part facilitated through a deeply patriarchal institution.<sup>12</sup> Life in the Gurkha regiments provided Sumitra a transitional space (cf. Winnicott 1971) within which she could integrate the values of her community (collective solidarity) and those of the West (rational self-interest), in which she could actually experience what for most Nepali youth is a place remote and idealized and engaged only through commodities and images. Within the bounded and protected realm of Gurkha bases, which housed a transnational Gurung community and encompassed multiple worldviews, Sumitra could forge an identity that was both relational and independent—locally grounded yet effective in a cosmopolitan context.

It is a feminist psychological anthropology, carrying on the legacy of Margaret Mead, Beatrice Whiting, Jean Briggs, and others, that will provide the methodological tools and the theoretical frameworks needed to understand the processes according to which Sumitra's daughters will develop their identities in a world that is growing still more complex than the one in which Sumitra herself came to womanhood. Social change has a profound effect on well-being, but the benefits and drawbacks of social change are not evenly distributed across classes, ethnicities, or genders (cf. Seymour 1999), because preexisting inequities condition the circumstances—cognitive, emotional, and material—into which change is received. The motivating forces and differential effects of globalization can be seen best through the examination of individual lives. To understand the processes by which young women achieve self-definition is of value in its own right, and it is indispensable to comprehending the fundamental power relations at the heart of the family and society, those of gender.

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ERNESTINE McHUGH is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Religion at the University of Rochester.

## NOTES

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1. Recent work on the Maoist movement in Nepal has been published in Hutt (2004) and Gellner (2003). See Pettigrew (2003) for a discussion of its impact on Gurungs.

2. See also Ahearn (2000, 2001), Liechty (1996), and Watkins (1996) for other work along these lines in Nepal.

3. See McHugh (1989, 2001) for more on the relation of these ideas to Gurung society.

4. See Des Chene (1991) for a detailed discussion of the role of the Gurkhas in Gurung life.

5. See March (1984) for a detailed analysis of this process and comparative material from the Tamang.

6. See Enslin (1998) and Skinner and Holland (1998) for a discussion of women's political responses to their condition in Nepal, and a moving account of their despair; Des Chene (1998) for an enactment of the conflict and grief that women fear; and Watkins (1996) for a discussion of women's creative use of dislocation in Nepal.

7. Although there are political movements in the Gurung community in Nepal that wish to replace the name "Gurung" with Tamu, the Gurungs' name for themselves in their own language, I found this proposal controversial among the people with whom I lived when I most recently returned to Nepal in 1999. Because the Gurungs among whom I conducted research continue to refer to themselves as "Gurung," I, too, have retained this term.

8. The perception of the self as susceptible to fragmentation under stress appears in a variety of contexts in Gurung discussions of personhood. See McHugh (1989) for more on that topic. Such emotional fragmentation is not at odds with coherence of identity but operates on a different level of experience. The need to contain contradiction is considered inevitable by Gurungs given the demands of social life (McHugh, 2002a).

9. See March (2002) for a discussion of similar experiences among Tamang women.

10. Mark Liechty (1998, 2003) has written extensively on this subject in relation to Nepalis in Kathmandu.

11. See Obeyesekere (1981) for a similar argument and an analysis of such processes in relation to cultural and personal symbols in Sri Lanka.

12. This point was brought to my attention by Steven Parish, as part of his discussion of an earlier paper on Sumitra presented as part of the panel entitled *Morality and Power*, organized by Kathryn Geurts and Clare Ignatowski, at the eighth biennial meetings of the Society for Psychological Anthropology.

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