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***Book Review Essay: Nepali Migrant Women: Resistance and Survival in America*¹**

Isabella Chawrun²

Nepali Migrant Women: Resistance and Survival in America by Shobha Gurung is a timely and cross-disciplinary book. The latter characterization is attributed to Gurung's approach that centralizes participants within their own narratives. As an overall comment, this latter attribute is reflected in the discussion, resulting in a substantial contribution to scholarship within the field of Sociology of Immigration and Women and Gender Studies.

The book focuses on the lives of immigrant Nepali women living in the United States, who, like other racialized women, are often depicted as passive objects constructed by the political and social forces around them. Gurung challenges this depiction by reflecting on the myriad of personal and structural reasons why the women immigrate, and the consequences (intended and not) of their immigration. In this way, Gurung produces a text that centralizes the experiences, intensions, narratives, and feelings of the women, while creating a nuanced and relevant argument that is applicable across the humanities and social sciences. Many scholars have published their thoughts about this book, therefore, in this review, I reflect on a less explored but critical component of the book, Gurung's declaration that belonging to the Nepalese diaspora is a critical component of the methodology. I quickly explore the significance of Gurung's statement in a discussion of the politics of positionality in anthropology and ethnography.

Between 1991 and 2008, Gurung studied the narratives of 35 women, ages twenty-eight to fifty-seven, who immigrated to the United States from Nepal. These women are highly educated, most with bachelor's degrees or higher, which established or contributed greatly to their upper-middle class lifestyle in Nepal. Upon arriving to the United States however, the women collectively experience significant downward mobility as they work in the informal sector as domestic workers in restaurants, as homemakers, or in childcare. They often face emotional abuse, long hours, minimal compensation, and are routinely subjugated to racism from their American and South Asian employers. However, instead of focusing on the women's positions as informal service employees and the hardships they face because of it, Gurung elaborates on the positive and negative consequences of immigrating, the women's reasons for doing so, and the political and social activism they engage in. This is an important decision as it shifts the discourse from reproducing the radicalized other in scholarship and instead creates a nuanced and intriguing argument about the women's agency as Nepalese immigrants. Gurung states that by immigrating to the United States, the women establish financial, social, and political security for themselves and their transnational families as well as make significant contributions to social change back in Nepal. Gurung argues that from this, the women established their roles in their families and community as powerful and decisive agents. Further, Gurung highlights that from the tools they gained by immigrating to the United States, the women build a transnational community of

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humanitarian activism, enacting powerful forms of agency that rarely goes recognized by scholars and family alike.

I particularly enjoyed how Gurung organized the book. Following the introduction, Gurung discusses the structural conditions that influence Nepalese immigration to the United States and across South Asia. This chapter sets the background for the book as it reflects on the forces that influence, alter, and affect the women's decision to migrate out of Nepal. Chapters three and four discuss the interplay of these structural forces that affect the women's employment and personal experiences while living in the United States. In these chapters, Gurung addresses how the women play the role of the Nepalese homemaker that their employers expect and desire as a critical tool of securing their employment. The women emphasize their shared connection of language, entertainment, religion, food, and other cultural capital with their employers to make themselves more attractive employees, which increases their chances of finding and securing employment. Building from this discussion, chapter five articulates how the women's increased financial security and long working hours cause a shift in gender roles in their conjugal and family lives. Gurung discusses the tensions, slippages, and conflicts of holding multiple roles that clash all at once. As the women work 12-hour shifts, six to seven days a week, they are also entangled in their roles as transnational mothers and wives. For example, Gurung discusses the emotional and personal distress the women feel from being physically distant from their children but also how their US income supports their children's expensive education in private school in Nepal and the economic opportunities that it awards their children. This book finishes with a discussion about the women's contributions and dedication to transnational charity and social activism, such as building and operating schools for orphaned children, fundraising after natural disasters, and sending money back to their family members and children, while finding employment within oppressive and exploitive positions.

I believe that the book would benefit from a critical discussion of many concepts that were used to construct the arguments, in particular concepts of 'the good mother', a 'good life', and 'empowerment'. These concepts are central to the argument but were not critically engaged in the text. For example, Gurung argues that the women create 'a good life' for themselves and their families. It is from this insight that Gurung argued the women expressed agency within their employment and overcame their oppressive working situations. However, these concepts can potentially limit engaged discussions of agency with racialized women. Saba Mahmood *Politics of Piety* (2004) explores how Muslim women in Egypt formulate concepts of self and enact forms of agency within oppressive regimes of the Islamic Revival. Mahmood critically examines feminist scholarship of agency as heavily westernized and limited. To Mahmood, feminist theories of agency often uncritically use concepts of empowerment and rebellion, which creates a bias against women whose lives do not fit within these western images of empowered womanhood. I believe Gurung's book would have produced an incredibly rich account in similar ways as Mahmood's text did if it included a discussion of the theoretical orientation of agency, the use of agency, and its limitations. Related, I also believe the book did not fully reflect upon the racism present among the women's experiences. The women routinely reflect on how their Nepalese identity made them desirable homemakers because they were seen as poor and needing work but also honest and hardworking people, in particular to their South Asian employers. These concepts are highly charged within colonial settings, but Gurung failed to compliment it with a scholarly discussion.

Part of my critical reading of the book reflects on the methodology Gurung incorporates. As a feminist sociologist by trade, Gurung uses ethnographic research techniques common to anthropology and sociology. As an anthropologist myself, I can reflect upon the ethnographic

methodology Gurung uses. Gurung takes space in the book to discuss methods, which is a refreshing change to common texts in the social sciences. By discussing the methods, the reader is given a better window into the arguments of the book. We can reflect on how the field work was conducted rather than simply guess, as we must for many authors who fail to elaborate on their methods in the interest of theory.

As expected for a social science text that uses ethnographic methods, Gurung uses interviews and focus groups for the bulk of the data. Gurung supplemented these methods with participant observation by attending events in the women's homes and in cultural centres. Gurung elaborates that many of these events are centred around the women's social activism, as strategy meetings, fundraising events, or recruitment parties. It is through these experiences that Gurung reflects on the incredible labour the women put into their activism. One particularly interesting part of the text is that Gurung includes appendixes that clearly outline the women's ethnographic data, including their education level, demographic information (age, religion, caste, ethnicity), reasons for migrating, and their employment in Nepal versus the United States. This further centralizes the women in the text because readers can refer to these pages throughout the book to re-familiarize themselves with each woman as Gurung creates arguments based on their narratives.

My discussion moves into a critique on Gurung's limited reflection on the politics of positionality. Gurung states "[a]s a feminist ethnographer, I sought to understand women's experiences from their perspectives. Hence, it was important for me that the women were able to narrate their own stories" (2015:18). But what does it mean to be an ethnographer? Ethnography is difficult to define. Typically, it includes participant observation, where a scholar goes 'into the field' and observes how people act, create, and be in their spaces (Clifford 1983). It also includes interviews, sometimes focus groups (an interview with multiple people discussing one topic), and an analysis of cultural artifacts. To many, and for myself, studying the cultural artifacts of a particular field site means visiting the archives and reading them for what they construct, create, embody, and employ (cf. Stoler 2002, 2008). For others, it means reflecting on visuals in film and photographs (Guindi 2004). Beyond the actual methods, ethnography becomes a theoretical, historical, and ethical debate. Unfortunately, ethnography emerged as a colonial practice and implicates all scholars who use it within its colonial origins. Clifford argues that ethnography "cannot ultimately be understood in isolation from more general political-epistemological debates about writing and the representation of otherness...[It] emerged as a privileged, sanctioned source of data about exotic peoples [and] valid anthropological abstractions were to be based, wherever possible on the intensive cultural descriptions [of the locality in question] by qualified scholars" (1983:120). Here, Clifford elaborates on how ethnography creates moments in the field that requires scholars to translate their experiences into academic rhetoric. Comaroff and Comaroff (2003), and many others, argue that at these moments of translation many complexities of the field are reduced, and it is through this reduction, that an inevitable residue of the scholar is left on the arguments that are made. Furthermore, and more than just theoretically, ethnography was (is?) a tool of the state to re-establish colonial mentalities and subjectivities over subjugated Others. It hinges on the colonial encounter as it relies on the ethnographic authority of the scholar to translate local happenings into a language that academics will understand. This translation requires and operates because of the unequal power dynamic between the researcher and participant, a relationship that is not easily rectified (Asad 1994; Clifford 1983; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

There are key elements that distinguish Gurung's study from typical historical ethnographies. First, Gurung conducts the study in the United States, which is atypical to

traditional approaches to ethnography that are typically conducted abroad. Second, Gurung declares “I am an immigrant woman, part of an emerging migrant/immigrant Nepali community and diaspora. As a member of this community, I was naturally interested in the shifting patterns of migrations taking shape around me” (2015:6). Gurung argues that this relationship and positioned identity “accessed sensitive data about immigration issues and conjugal relationships...based on our shared experiences and cultural understandings... which helped me connect with women from these two religious’ groups” (Gurung 2015:19). From this statement, we can ask if this belonging resolves the power imbalance between Gurung and the ethnographic participants and, thus, if it excludes this work from the colonial beginnings of ethnography? Many anthropologists and decolonial scholars would say no. As Gurung declares belonging to the community, Gurung is simultaneously removed. In a critical anthropological essay, Kirin Narayan (1993) argues the complexity of the ethnographer’s relationship to the field is more dynamic than just a dichotomous insider/outsider relationship (1993: 671).

Gurung does not discuss the many privileges that comes with being the ethnographer that the participants of the study do not have. For example, Gurung’s American education and credentials as a professor at Southern Utah University established a career in the American University. This is vastly different than the women participating in the study. Central to Gurung’s argument, the women are highly educated but experienced significant downward mobility when they immigrated to the United States. Their professional experience in finance, education, healthcare, and non-profit sectors, as well as their university education, were not recognized in the United States. This forces them to explore employment opportunities within undocumented spaces. This labour environment subjects them to abuse, and due to their undocumented immigration status, the women have little political and legal recourse to resolve the abuse. With few options, the women often quit their jobs to end the abuse but only to find a new one within the same social network they found their first job, likely resulting in a similar working environment. This is entirely unlike Gurung’s situation. As a professor with a doctoral degree, Gurung has significant power over the research and career. Gurung is protected by labour laws, awarded credentials recognized worldwide, and has certain autonomy to make decisions about publishing, research, teaching, and other obligations that come with a career in academia. This automatically positions Gurung in an unbalanced relationship with the research participants. We learn nothing of how this imbalance affects the relationships Gurung forge with the women, instead we only know that Gurung gains access to this community as part of the Nepalese diaspora. This discussion supports Narayan’s (1993), and many other anthropologists’ (cf. Abu-Lughod 1991; Srinivas 1966), claims that there is a fundamental power difference between the ethnographer and the field (space and person) despite any shared experiences or embodiments.

Scholars who argue that belonging to a diaspora or a community of which they are studying grants extenuating privileges, should also be aware of the potential damages that these connections can make. First, by arguing that belonging to a diaspora makes one an insider, and thus diminishes the power inequalities among the participant and researcher, enacts a colonial concept of authenticity (Narayan 1993). Narayan discusses how the concept of the insider stems from traditional ethnography during the Radcliffe-Brown, Boas, Mead, Malinowski era, where scholars would enter various far out locations, to study the ‘authentic natives’ to gain insider perspectives on how they lived. As part of their methodology, many ethnographers discussed the importance of having an ‘insider’ or Chief Informant. This Chief Informant was a person that could support data collection by teaching the ethnographer their language, provide explanations and translations of cultural happenings, map out kin charts, and possibly even collect data. Thus, when ethnographers

consider this insider/outsider perspective as part of their methodology, they are bringing up this historical institution of colonial authenticity.

Second, scholars that argue that as an insider, the ‘native’s point of view’ is more accessible, are not recognizing of the inherent power inequality within the researcher/participant relationship. As discussed above, the ethnographer always leaves their perspectives and biases in their analysis as a residue of oneself. Traditional ethnographers would spend years in one field location, suggesting that they were ‘living among the natives’, to gain insights into how Indigenous peoples lived, behaved, what they valued and created. With Chief Informants, these scholars devised complex arguments and accounts that they would apply universally to the geopolitical space (e.g., Pacific Islanders, the Nuer etc.). To resolve the problematic accounts of a white scholar studying the lives of brown and black people, many scholars then conducted ethnography within their own communities as insiders themselves (Narayan 1993). Although being part of the linguistic and cultural community does resolve many of the challenges of translation (but not entirely), it does not absolve the power imbalance between the scholar and the participant. For example, Abu-Lughod (1991) argues that scholars who share an ethnic connection with their participants are in an awkward position of speaking *for* their research participants as engaged scholars and speaking *from* the community. While a close relationship to the field site may gain close and important insights for the ethnographer, creating a shared identity through certain markers such as race, embodiment, ethnicity, gender etc. “always entails the violence of repressing or ignoring other forms of difference” (Lughod 1991: 468). This is true for Gurung’s ethnography as certain privileges were ignored from the discussion of positionality.

Narayan argues that the “fixity of a distinction between “native” and “non-native” anthropologists” is a false one (1993: 671). Narayan argues for an ‘enactment of hybridity’, which argues that the ethnographer’s position in the field is continuously shifting and never either an insider or an outsider (1993: 672). Narayan (1993) and Abu-Lughod (1991) argue that scholars can never fully belong to the group they are researching nor be entirely removed. As much as the privileged position scholars have over their participants removes them from the group, they also rely on the generosity of the participants for the data. Thus, the scholar is both within and removed from the group they are studying. This is true for all scholars, in varying degrees, who use ethnography as their methods.

Narayan’s use of hybridity recognizes the multiple positions ethnographers hold in the field as scholars of the Ivy Tower of the Academy and as subjects of “the world of everyday life” (1993: 672). Rather than arguing an insider positionality without referencing what this could mean or where these ideas originated, Gurung could have discussed how her positionality as a woman of the Nepalese diaspora studying other women of the diaspora was both beneficial and limiting. In addition, if Gurung includes a short discussion of how the position shifted throughout the field work, and within different spaces, the book would have contributed to discussions of the politics of positionality instead of being rather limited in the discussion.

All of this said, I argue that Gurung honors the women in a way that challenges the historical perspective of ethnographic field work, which does not fully reproduce the cannon of ethnography. Narayan (1993), and more recent decolonial scholars such as Tuck and Yang (2014) and Simpson (2014) argue that ethnographic and social science research should be entirely informed by the research participants by respecting what data participants want included in the study, honoring people’s refusal to participate in research, and being aware that participants may be critical of the academic spaces where the research is created. In addition, decolonial perspectives argue that rather than extracting what scholars need for their publications and

academic careers, scholars should create mutual benefits for the participants by forging unique and long-lasting relationships with people and their larger networks. I believe that Gurung provides this sensitivity. Gurung elaborates on the extensive ethical process to ensure that only the narratives and discussions the participants wanted to be published were ultimately included in the book. Gurung's long term research includes repeat interviews and multiple phases of research, which demonstrates a commitment to the women of the study.

Overall, the book is a great reference for scholars in the social sciences and humanities as a text that challenges common perceptions of immigrant women (or women in general) who work in domestic and informal economies as docile, passive objects. Gurung acknowledges that these women hold a wealth of knowledge as transnational actors that is often overlooked. By doing so, the book creates a discussion of different ways immigrant women enact agency within their given situations, fundamentally changing the cannon in sociology of immigration.

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