

The Narrative of Abjection and Dissidence: Reading The Voice of *Bhumika*

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the narrative of abjection and analyzes the voices of dissent portrayed in Bhumika Shrestha's autobiography Bhumika: Autobiography of a Transgender (2018). Shrestha is a trans-woman, who suffers due to the established gender concept, normative heterosexuality and encounters consistent criticism, hatred and rejection from the society. Nonetheless, she dares to challenge the established social values and gender austerity. She rejects and resists against the patriarchal gender coding and struggles hard for her identity claim. She has been raising her voice for the rights of sexual and gender minorities since she got associated with Blue Diamond Society. To explore the established idea of gender and abjection, I have analyzed the life experience of Bhumika employing theoretical concept of Judith Butler that sheds light on the discriminatory concept of 'liveable' and 'unliveable' bodies in terms to sexual orientations.

Keywords: Patriarchy, heterosexuality, transgender, abjection, dissidence

Introduction

Patriarchal notion has strictly demarcated gender binary– male and female, which denies the existence of transsexuals. Long practiced and socially validated patriarchal gender stricture never thinks beyond the female-male compartments. The binary gender concept is so deeply rooted into the mind of people that they hardly accept the other sexualities. Within such rigid social structure, homosexuals and transsexuals either hide their sexuality or timidly accept criticism, rejection and remain silent. Most of them are mistreated by their own family members, friends and neighbors. Consequently, they feel so vulnerable and low to confront the world. In such social

circumstances, a trans-woman, Bhumika Shrestha, courageously crosses all the demarcations and barriers of patriarchal social system and claims her identity. In this regard, the paper explores the narrative of abjection and analyzes the voice of Bhumika. It is based on Bhumika Shrestha's autobiography, *Bhumika: Autobiography of a Transgender* (2018). To deal with established patriarchal gender ideology and structural rejection of transgender, I have employed the concept of Judith Butler from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990).

Bhumika was born as the youngest son, Kailash in a middle class family in Naikap, Kathmandu. However, from the very early childhood, he was more inclined towards the female chores and activities. He started befriending girls and growing hair longer that his friends and neighbors start teasing and humiliating him. He struggles so hard to balance the voice of his soul and the expectation of the family and society. The growing tension leaves him so helpless and lonely. The journey of Bhumika's self-realization and gender identity was full of criticism and denials. Nevertheless, she gathers courage to walk along the arduous path. In this regards, the paper sheds light on Bhumika's life narratives, analyzes the social attitude and her dissenting voices.

Method and Theoretical Concept

The paper has explored the life of Bhumika Shrestha and analyzed her personal experiences to figure out her dissenting personality. For the theoretical support, body theory, mainly of Butler (1990) has been employed, however, related referential materials have been consulted to strengthen the arguments of the paper.

The wide spread gender value is based on power relation which validates the compulsory heterosexuality, superiority of men and the subordination of women. In the beginning, patriarchal society disseminated the concept of gender binary and gradually authenticated gender hierarchy. Several thinkers critique gender as an outcome of social construction rather than being a natural phenomenon. Most of them perceive sex as natural and gender as a construct. Among them Simon de Beauvoir has distinctly voiced for the issue. However, Butler (1990) argues, "There is nothing in Beauvoir account that guarantees that 'one' who becomes a woman is necessarily female" (p. 8). Her opinion has challenged the well accepted concept of Beauvoir and unveiled another major area for further discussion. Butler (1990) while describing body as a medium of cultural coding highlights that the 'the body' is itself a construction and the myriad 'bodies' constitute the domain of gender subjects (p. 8). She denies traditionally and culturally coded male-female bodily restrictions and sides for various gender subjects.

Gender binary has erected socio-cultural barriers that restricts the possible gender spectrum. It has not only created unrepairable gender imbalance validating male superiority, but also devalued the existence of transgender forbidding them in social spheres. Amidst such patriarchal rigidities, the transsexual community feels so vulnerable and intimidated to come over and expose their sexual orientation. Mostly, they be-

come victim of harsh reactions and abjection from family, friend and the whole society. Patriarchal strictness become more intelligible when they are not even taken as worth living beings. In this regards, Butler in her interview with Vasu Reddy (2004) explains:

It comes down to the question of whose lives are regarded as worthy lives, and whose illness is worthy of treatment, and whose dying and death is worthy of acknowledgment and grief. ... Grieving became a political issue within the '80s and early '90s, and continued into present time. ... Member of the dominant culture looked upon at gay people and silently and openly concluded, 'well their lives are not real lives anyway... (p. 120)

Butler comprehensively portrays the real social attitude towards sexual and gender minorities, during '90s, however, in Nepal even today they are not acceptable to the society. Lots of homosexuals and trans-genders are being victims of patriarchal heterosexual measures and treated as unworthy beings.

Like Butler, many western researchers have shed light on the plights and predicaments of homosexuals during the AIDS burst. Shepard (2009) highlights the fact that in '80s the narrative of Gay shifted again due to proliferating AIDS as it was linked with the image of illness (p. 24). The homosexual community suffered public lashes, hatred and abjection due to the association of their sexuality with disease and sickness. Some celebrities, such as popular vocalist of the rock band Queen, Freddie Mercury was diagnosed with AIDS and died within twenty four hours of announcement of his disease. The whole world was shocked and also threatened by the disease which killed Freddie. In fact, these sorts of doubt, rejection and disrespectful opinion towards homosexuals were nothing more than the long established heterosexual severity and intolerance. Similarly, Johnston (2017) recalls the sufferings of sexual and gender minorities and public opinion in relation to AIDS epidemic, “-As it were intensely stigmatized, told they were” getting what they deserved”” (p. 94). Every community was against them when the group of sexual minorities unremittingly faced violence, isolation and threat to life. Moreover, the American government was also unacceptable and negative towards them as they prioritized “Don't Ask Don't Tell” culture (Johnston, 2017, p. 95) within military institution. It shows their insensitive behavior the sexual minorities that compelled them to remain silent about their sexuality.

Deeply rooted patriarchal gender ideology has obstructed for the acceptance of transsexuals. The society stigmatizes and rejects the one, who belongs to other than the male and female compartments. They have to suffer rejections, and bear humiliating words such as chakka and hijara in public domain. This type of public shaming prevails everywhere around the globe. Elyn Bhandari, a first trans-man from Nepal shares his bitter experiences in a television show Mitini (2020) with Malvika Subba. He shares that Nepali society is unimaginably critical and judgmental towards trans-people since they face biasness everywhere from school to hospital. Whenever he visits hospital, the interrogation begins from the reception:

Who is the patient?

I am.

Are you a man?

I am a transman.

I am not sure, whether doctors will check you or not since they only take female patients. (11:10-12:30 mts.)

The conversation clarifies the fact that the transgenders are harassed and sometime deprived of medical facilities as well, even though the constitution of Nepal has assured the basic rights of each and every group of people. It suggests the contrasting and complicated scenario in implementation of the laws if it comes the cases of sexual minorities. Bhandari's case is just an example, the existing social scenario and rigid mindset of people have never accepted our nearby fellows and crushed their dignity in each steps.

People from transgender community encounters multiple rejections and series of humiliations in their lives. Mainly their suffering begins from home when the family members starts mistreating them. The next important place is school, where most of them get victim of mockery and denial; they are teased by friends and treated differently by the teachers. Consequently, most of them run away from home and local society and move towards the new place or big cities. Nepal's first transgender model Anjali Lama had to run away from her village in Nuwakot when tension increased between herself and family and took refuge in Kathmandu. After long struggle, she took part in a beauty pageant organized by Blue Diamond society and won a title Ms. Charming and later featured in VOW fashion magazine as a cover model. However, she could not get any job. She shares her experiences:

I took a training course at a modeling agency called Ramp for one month. Learned about catwalks... I went to many auditions at the same agency, Ramp, but I was never selected. I was the only transgender person out of everyone in all the auditions. The owner of that agency was a lady. I asked her, "Ma'am, why am I always rejected? Is it because of my identity?" And she said, "Yes, they didn't want to select you because you are a transgender." (Lama, 2014, pp. 89-90)

Anjali's bitter experience presents the deep rooted patriarchy within each nook and corner of the social institutions. Despite her capabilities the modeling organization always rejected her and denied her presence. Amid such social circumstance, people from sexual and gender minorities do not only suffer from criticism but also deprived of resource reach and economic independence. Such deprivation could impact on overall growth of the community, which could compel them to involve into unlawful acts such as prostitutions. Simran Sherchan, a transgender woman happens to involve into this profession for a while. As she explains, "Slowly, my money ran out because I had no

work. My many transgender sex worker friends advised me to go to Thamel, the tourist district. At the beginning, I went for prostitution hesitantly-..." (Sherchan, 2014, p. 58). Transgender activist Bhumika Shrestha and Sarosy Neupane also accept the involvement of transgender women in prostitution with some reservations that such cases are an outcome of patriarchal gender biasness, lack of job opportunity and abjection. Such cases also exposes the social attitude towards sexual and gender minorities that takes them as unworthy and unliveable beings.

Result and Discussion

A transgender woman activist, Bhumika Shrestha was born and brought up as a darling youngest son of the family, however, he finds himself more interested towards female chores and activities. In her autobiography *Bhumika*, she recalls, "I did not feel that I am a man. ...I started imagining myself a woman. My activities were also like of a girl" (Shrestha, 2018, p. 27). Many transgender man or woman behaves differently to their biological gender. They find mismatch between their bodily identity and sexual orientation. As a transgender woman Sherchan (2014) shares, "I felt that my soul was in the wrong body" (p. 57). Kailash alias Bhumika was passing through the similar complicated and confusing state of mind and body during those days. His mother tries her best to make him a son but he always involves into woman works. In this regards she reminds, "I used to put on my sister's dresses time and again. I had inclination towards make-up and also in dance. .. I always used to wrap a towel while taking bath like women do.... I wanted to put on brassier" (Shrestha, 2018, p. 29). His every little act and interest has pointed towards his different sexual orientation that social assignment was rather unusual to him. He could not stop himself from feminine inclination because of which he started being consistently teased and misbehaved by his friends and neighbors.

Patriarchal values laden society never recognizes the existence beyond male-female gender boundary. The strict adoption of narrow gender concept from time unknown has made this areas an unquestionable territory. If somebody with different sexual orientation appears, the whole society gathers with judgments, suspicions and penetrating reactions. Especially the issue of sexuality becomes so sensitive that the family and society together criticize and demoralize the person. Bhumika has encountered several humiliating behavior of friends, teachers and neighbors. She remembers many such incidents:

When I wanted to sit along with girls, friends and teachers used to tease me badly. ...While teaching words related to gender such as man, woman and other, they used to look at me and laugh. ... I also had so difficult time on the way to school. People looked at me with hatred and rejection. My neighbors mocked at me whenever I came out of my house. I wished, there was no light. In the darkness nobody could see me. (Shrestha, 2018, pp. 30-31)

Bhumika's past experiences exclusively depict the real characteristics of patriarchal society, where sexual and gender minorities get no place even to breath properly. They become victim of social surveillance, intimidating reactions and humiliating behaviors of the people around them. Moreover, they never get recognition and respect just because of their being different to socially accepted genders. However Butler (1990) critiques the idea of social construction of gender and argues that even 'the body' is construction that carries set of cultural meanings (p. 8). Bhumika suffers due to gender coding on bodies and also faces continuous conflict between her bodily act and cultural branding. Some people even embarrassed her in public places while fetching water from stone tap calling her 'hijara' (Shrestha, 2018, p. 32). *Hijara* is a derogatory term, which means a third gender (transgender). Normally, they look like a man but dress and behave like a woman. Because of their unmatched appearance, they become a matter of laughter or curiosity to people. Chaudhary, a trans-woman had to listen lots of negative comments from her neighbors, aunts, and uncles, who would call him *maugiya* that is similar to *chakka* (Chaudhary, 2014, p. 79). Patriarchal society categorizes male-female gender as natural and transgender as unnatural, which brand them unacceptable to the society. In such situation, sexual minorities are disheartened and discouraged to expose their real sexuality. Some people even attempt to kill themselves due to towering stress and frustration. Bhumika was also so frustrated that she nearly committed suicide. Fortunately, she remains alive, but decides to quit her study when she was in grade ten. However, she has profuse stubbornness and resistance that kept her firm to move further.

Bhumika gradually develops rebellious mindset and start acting as per her wishes despite social objections. Her rising consciousness gets proper platform to flourish when she accidentally meets Pinky Gurung at Ratnapark. For her surprise, Pinky straightaway points out her sexuality and welcomes her to Blue Diamond Society (BDS), a group that works for the rights of gender and sexual minorities. She enters BDS premises when she was just sixteen; she becomes aware of her gender identity and starts revolting against discriminatory social values. She throws away her old clothes and starts putting on female dresses publicly. She shares her experiences as follows:

I had already revolted. I started putting on female dress while going out. I did not bother about the society. In the beginning I put on skirt and ladies t-shirt. I also started wearing kurtha. I felt so odd because I had flat chest. I started using padded brassier. It was so unusual in the beginning but gradually I got accustomed to it. (Shrestha, 2018, p. 51)

It sounds quite simple and easy, however going against family and social values is a huge challenge. There is always the chances of rejection and of being ostracize. Chettri (2017) brings real scenario of Nepali society where people behave so negatively towards non-binary genders that to save family prestige they are even compelled to aban-

don their home (p. 112). Bhumika as well leaves her study and accepts the challenge to walk along the path of freedom. Her family members do not interfere her action which smoothens her arduous journey. She not only put on woman attire but also determined to do whatever necessary to become a woman. She says, "I was ready to do anything for my transformation" (Shrestha, 2018, p. 52). She even pierced her nose, which was against Newari culture. Day by day Bhumika became more determined, which was an outcome of her inner strength and dissenting personality. Additionally, the exposure she got in BDS helps her in two ways: firstly, she recognizes her own gender identity and secondly, she develops consciousness to raise voice against gender discrimination and for their rights and freedom.

After joining BDS she changed her name from Kailash to Bhumika, which mean 'roles', and made her first public appearance on national television introducing herself as Bhumika Shrestha (p. 66). Revealing herself as a transgender on national television was an audacious act, which she does to resist against the existing gender rigidities. However, she had to suffer the structural biasness since the government administrative officer denied issuing her citizenship unless she shorten her hair and dress like a Nepali man with dhakatopi (Nepali hat) (Shrestha, 2018, p. 55). It shows the attitude of phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality in Butler's term (1990, p. 17) that rejects non-binary genders. Bhumika finds herself completely helpless in that situation and surrenders in front of the national law. She gets citizenship in the name of Kailash Shrestha under gender category, 'male.' She was so hurt by the unequal law of nation that never acknowledges the transgender as a sexual category. In this regards Lama (BS 2079) postulates, "Prevailing patriarchal structural mind-set still hesitates to accept people with different sexual and gender orientation" (p. 40). It aptly applies to Bhumika's life when she was forced to adopt the same gender category from which she wants to move ahead.

Bhumika never gets intimidated by the structural power and keeps on her journey that exhibit her dissidence. Against patriarchal gender framing, she has worked hard to look like and become a woman. One of the daring decisions is to put knife under her skin to transform her body. In this regards, she shares, "...I used hormone to stop the growth of my beard and mustache. I did breast implantation to have a breast like of a woman. I also have some surgery on my genital" (Shrestha, 2018, p. 105). It exposes her intense inner urge to become a woman, which was full of risk. However she accepts every danger for her physical transformation. She does not even bother about people's reaction about body and keeps on pursuing her dream. She shows her agency through breaking her silence and being vocal for her identity. Her decision taking capability; clarity on what she wants to become and her undeterred journey despite being crowded by judgments of negative people show her real agency.

Bhumika has walked along the difficult path and taken every step so carefully that ultimately led her to the destination. When she participated in Miss Pink 2007

and won the title, all of a sudden she became the talk of the town. Immediately after the contest, she becomes a celebrity transgender activist and a renowned personality all over Nepal. Later, when the Nepal government corrected the previous law related to the citizenship for transgender, she applies for new citizenship and becomes first Nepali transgender woman to get the card with female identity under gender category “other”. She has become successful in her life only through her continuous effort and hard work. She has raised dissenting voices against the outdated patriarchal values and boundaries. For her audacious journey and activism in the field of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexual, queer (LGBTIQ) rights she has just been awarded with International Woman of Courage Award 2022 provided by American government. Even born as a boy, taking difficult journey to search her gender identity, Bhumika, a transgender woman has proved herself to be a person with abundance resisting capability and a powerful voice.

Conclusion

Patriarchal heteronormativity has validated gender binary that accepts only male and female as natural genders and rejects beyond that as unnatural. In fact there are many people who do not belong to the traditional gender compartments. Standardized patriarchal concept of sexuality has implanted specific gender ideologies into the people that they exhibit complete negative attitude towards non-binary gender. People from sexual and gender minorities suffer extreme humiliation and abjection due to the discriminatory norms, values and behavior of the society. Amidst such rigid social circumstances, Kailash Shrestha aka Bhumika was consistently humiliated and rejected by friends and neighbors because of his feminine activities in his childhood. In this context, the paper has explored and analyzed the hardship and struggle of a trans-woman Bhumika, and her unremitting resisting voice against patriarchal gender ideology that authenticates her dissidence.

Bhumika revolts against patriarchal gender rigidities from her young age, which flourishes after she gets associated with Blue Diamond Society (BDS). Then after, she not only realizes her gender identity, but also gets empowered to work for the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. Her journey was not easy, nevertheless she dares to walk along the thorny path. She surpasses social stigmas; climbs over the towering wall of gender discrimination; and steps over every barrier that comes on her path. Through her deeds, Bhumika has proved herself to be a voice of dissidence that roars against patriarchal normative austerities and also for the rights, freedom, equality and justice for gender and sexual minorities.

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